

## Obliviate – Chapter One

“Ah, yes, Mister Potter, please have a seat,” said the old headmaster. His knowing eyes were full of life and good humor and he smiled genially at Harry. Then with a wave of his hand, a plush armchair appeared in front of his desk. Harry nodded gratefully and eased himself into the seat, apprehension eating away at his stomach from the inside. He sat there stiffly, not daring to make eye contact with the older man and feeling very small and insignificant before him. Dumbledore sat back on the other side of the desk, fiddling with a silver instrument and tapping it with his wand at different places, seemingly paying no attention to the sixth year Gryffindor.

He was confused and more than a little wary. Was this a trick to lure him into a false sense of security? What did he want with him? Harry had arrived at the headmaster's office expecting to be scolded, punished, and perhaps expelled for what he had done.

“How inconsiderate of me,” muttered Dumbledore. He gazed at Harry over his half-moon spectacles, his fierce blue eyes twinkling merrily. “Lemon drop?”

He snapped his fingers and a dish full of the sweet candies appeared with a small *pop* on the desk. Harry stared at the lopsided, overflowing bowl and shook his head. No, he had not been expecting *this*. Then again, how was it possible to know what to expect from the genius, unpredictable, and highly eccentric mind of Albus Dumbledore?

Finally, he set aside the silver gadget he had been inspecting and he looked at Harry, who tried his hardest to avoid eye contact with him.

“You may be wondering why I summoned you here, Harry,” he began gravely, the merriment gone from his face.

The reply came back in a small voice, “Yes.”

“Look at me.”

Slowly, unwillingly, he raised his eyes to meet Dumbledore's, and he felt the familiar, unpleasant sensation of someone sifting through his

thoughts and memories. He tried to put up his mental barriers, to keep him out, to conceal the truth, but Dumbledore was a master Legilimens and his will was too strong. He felt his mind open up like a book to the older wizard, laying all his thoughts out, exposed.

*Will he see my secret? Will he know...?*

"Ah," he mumbled after a moment. He struck Harry with a piercing, ice cold gaze and his lips were curled downward into a frown. All the warmth was gone from his eyes and for the first time ever, Harry felt afraid in the headmaster's presence. The older man leaned forward across the desk, staring intently at Harry's face. "What are you hiding?" he asked sharply. "What do you *know*?"

A fist had crawled up out of his stomach and now had a death grip on his pulsing heart. Harry found it difficult to breathe and he felt sweat break out on his forehead.

"Tell me, Harry."

Guilt. A feeling of failure welled up in his chest and his face flushed. He felt ashamed in front of Dumbledore, ashamed that he had allowed himself to sink so low and disappoint this great man whom he respected and loved like a grandfather. How could he have failed him? It wasn't supposed to be this way. His cheeks were on fire and he wanted to disappear so he wouldn't have to be here and be confronted by the professor.

"S-sir-" he managed to stammer, taking note of how rigidly the headmaster was sitting in his seat. "I... there's something w-wrong with me..."

In a flash, Dumbledore had his wand up and pointed at Harry and he spoke in a strange language, one that he couldn't understand.

"Please!" he begged, "I just need more time, I can fix this on my own-"

Harry felt something tearing at his head from the inside, like a vicious animal had sunk its claws deep into his brain matter and was putting up a fight because it was being forcibly removed. He convulsed and nearly fell out of his chair, clutching madly at his head in futile attempt

to relieve the pain. It felt like there was an intense pressure pushing in at his skull from all sides, threatening to crush it under its oppressive force. A shrill, high-pitched wailing reached his ears and Harry realized it was coming from *him* as he screamed for mercy.

And as quickly as it had begun, it was over. Harry collapsed forward onto the desk, breathing heavily, tired and spent from ten seconds of hell. He peered up at the professor and he opened his mouth to say something but no words would come out.

Dumbledore regarded Harry with a sad smile and told him that everything was going to be okay. Then he raised his wand again and whispered, "*Obliviate.*"

He was lost and he was swimming.

Not in water, but in darkness and sounds and feelings and memories. It was disorienting, to say the least. He tried to open his eyes, found that he couldn't, and listened carefully, trying to determine where he was. Oddly enough, he felt as if he was light as a feather and floating on air, as if there was an invisible cushion holding him there, suspending him a few feet above the ground.

*Nonsense. People can't float.*

From somewhere over to his left, a hushed whisper rang out in the silence.

"Are you sure this is the best way?" a quiet female voice asked. He detected concern and uncertainty in her words. "Surely you can't do this, not now, not after all he has seen..."

"My decision is final," exclaimed another voice. This one was deeper and more powerful and the words were spoken with a sense of deep wisdom and sorrow. He had the impression that the person speaking was very tired and old.

"But won't he be missed...?"

He was starting to get a headache, but his entire body was numb and unresponsive, so all he could do was fly through the air and listen to

these two people talking about him. Who were they? Where were they taking him?

"I've already made arrangements. The matter has been taken care of." There was a slight pause and he heard rustling, like someone was sorting through their pockets. "Ah, here it is. Hold it right there... On three. One, two..."

Suddenly everything was spinning very quickly and wild winds were slapping his body. A thunderous noise surrounded him, sounding like a stampede of untamed hippogriffs and then he didn't know what happened next because his tenuous grip on the world faltered and he tumbled away into the quiet sanctuary of unconsciousness.

Sunlight. Bright, unrelenting, bothersome *light*.

It was filtering in from somewhere over to his right, yet he couldn't determine the exact location because his body was still refusing to take commands. So he chose to lie there, peacefully, silently, absorbing his environment through the only faculties he could use.

*Like I really have a choice at all. I can't move. I can't even open my eyes. What's wrong with me?*

There was a fragrant scent nearby. *Flowers*. But he was not outside. He knew this because he was reclined quite comfortably on a soft mattress, or something that felt very much like one. There was another scent in the air, sharp and pungent, but he couldn't tell what it was and he lost interest in it. To his left, there was an insistent, dull, humming sound, but he couldn't tell exactly what that was either. The last thing he noticed about his surroundings was that he was not alone.

He heard light footsteps clicking along on the floor, growing louder and louder until they stopped by his side. If he could move, he would have gasped because suddenly his hand was being held and caressed. His heart started beating madly in his chest and he thought it might punch through his ribcage and spill out on top of him but it managed to behave and he remained in one piece, still alive.

After a moment, he calmed down and realized that someone was speaking.

“...are you? Where did you *come* from?” A female voice, speaking in an unrecognizable accent. Inquisitive, quiet, and sad. Her grip was delicate, warm, soothing, and pleasant. Much too soon, he felt her squeeze his hand and then let go. “Please wake up soon.”

And with that, she was gone.

*Where am I?*

He pondered the thought for the first time, wracking his brain for possible hints. Even in his mind, all he could see was black nothingness. There were no memories explaining how he had arrived in this place that smelled of flowers and where a woman came and held his hand. He didn't have a clue because he was too distracted by another, more pressing, disturbing thought:

*Who am I?*

After a while, the footsteps returned. He still couldn't open his eyes or move, but now he saw an indistinct, pale blur through his closed eyelids instead of an orange, fleshy color, so he assumed it was nighttime. The footsteps approached and his hand was being held again. It was her.

This time, he felt her lightly touching his hair, moving strands away from his eyes. She traced invisible lines across his jawline and it tickled, but he couldn't move or laugh or ask her to stop. He could only lie there and feel her closeness, feel the warmth of her touch, hear the subtle beating of her heart and her soft, even breathing. He desperately wanted to sit up and ask her, “What is my name?” “Who are you?” and “Where am I?”

“I hope you get better.” He imagined her with a small, hopeful smile on her face as she whispered this. Then she repeated what she had said the last time, “Please wake up soon.”

He felt her leave and then he dropped back into darkness.

He learned that she would come multiple times each day, at least once but no more than three times. Every time she would hold his hand when she arrived, and she would always leave with, "Please wake up soon." Subtly, impossibly, he began to fall in love with her. He loved the feel of her soft, smooth hands on his and the sound of her voice, light and delicate and lovely. As his time in the sweet limbo went on, he realized that it was she who brought him flowers.

"I brought you a lilac today," she would say. "Please wake up soon."

She was his one and only lifeline to the world. She was a cherished messenger who let him know that he was alive and not forgotten, even if he himself forgot who he was and how he'd gotten to be where he was. He didn't know how he would have gone on without her. Her words were like magic and they healed him and made him stronger. After each of her visits, he felt more energized than before.

Soon, when she held his hand, he was able to move his fingers ever so slightly, to let her know he was there and he appreciated her presence. The first time he had done it, she had gasped and he'd felt a jolt run through her arm into his, but she had quickly calmed down and composed herself.

"You can hear me, can't you?" And then she'd done something she'd never done before – she kissed him lightly on the lips. "Please wake up soon."

What must have been weeks later (although it could have been days or years, he couldn't tell which), he could smile or frown and he had greater control over his hand. Now when she visited, she would ask him simple 'yes' or 'no' questions and he would answer accordingly.

"Do you like the rain?"

A frown. He heard melodic laughter and he wanted to touch her, but all he could do was squeeze her hand.

"No? Eh, me neither." She paused and he saw in his head a beautiful woman looking up at the ceiling and thoughtfully pursing her lips, pondering what to say next. For some reason, he pictured her having soft, cocoa brown eyes, but he couldn't visualize any other feature of

her. Then she asked in her distinct, lilting accent, "What about games? Do you like games?"

A smile. More sweet laughter.

"Hmm... do you like card games?" It didn't matter that sometimes her one-sided conversations were dull and banal. They were never boring because they were the only conversations he ever heard anymore. He smiled again. "Ah, do you like solitaire?"

Ah, he knew what that was. It was a card game that one played alone. Though how he knew this was beyond his understanding.

"Oh!" Her voice sounded earnest and interested. "What about card tricks? If you could open your eyes I could show you one my dad taught me... I swear it almost looks like real *magic*."

When she spoke the word, he felt a tingle run up his spine and he shivered involuntarily. *Magic*. There was something about the word that was important to him, but what was it? Why was magic important to him? Magic wasn't even *real*. He desperately thought of reasons that he would find the word so meaningful. Maybe he'd been a magician, entertaining children at parties and impressing people at street corners with his sleight of hand. The image of himself wearing a ridiculous cape and pulling live rabbits out of his hat was ludicrous. No, he hadn't been a magician.

So what *had* he been? What was the significance of magic? Then, a sinking feeling settled itself in his stomach. Maybe magic wasn't even important at all. Maybe it had just been a sick little mishap that had made him feel strangely when she'd said the word. Maybe there was a virus spreading up his spinal cord that made him shiver every so often, and she'd just happen to say 'magic' at the right time. His hopes flickered like a dying flame and went out.

He'd never find out who he was.

Through the excitement, he hadn't noticed that she had left. He only noticed her absence when he heard her returning, except this time there was another set of footsteps, heavier and slower beneath her

light, rapid ones. The voices sounded slightly distant, as if they were coming from outside the room.

“Come this way, doctor!” Her voice was energetic and alive. “I swear to you, his whole body shook! You need to take a look at him, maybe he'll wake up!”

He heard some unconcerned protests, “It's impossible. He's in a coma, paralyzed, probably brain dead-”

“He's *not* brain dead and he's *not* paralyzed! I talk to him every day-”

“You speak with him?” The doctor's voice wasn't hopeful, it was cynical and condescending. “Does he talk back to you?”

“Well, no, but-”

“Then you're wasting your time. I'm sure he can't hear you.”

“Please just check him, sir.”

A weary sigh. He could detect the faint scent of cigarettes and old man cologne. “Alright, I'll do it. But don't come back to me harassing me all the time-”

“I won't, sir!” She was excited again. “I swear!”

“Alright, alright!” the doctor snapped. “Just pipe down a sec, will you?”

He felt a stiff, rough hand pull his eyelids back and a light was shone in his eyes, one at a time.

“Well, his pupils are dilating-”

She didn't even let him finish his sentence before she quickly interrupted, “Does that mean he'll recover?”

“Miss O'Connor!” the doctor was indignant and it sounded like he was running out of patience with the overexcited woman. “*Please* try to calm yourself! And no, it does *not* mean that he'll recover. You'd need a miracle for that to happen.”



“Oh.”

“It's not like I have some magic wand that I can wave about and cure any ailment-”

At the words *magic wand*, his entire body jolted and his eyes snapped open. The words echoed through his head and he heard screaming and crying, he saw an old man with a long beard and twinkling blue eyes, he remembered feeling an excruciating pain in his head, and he remembered one other thing...

His head hurt from seeing so much unexpected light – he had grown quite accustomed to the darkness while spending so much time with his eyes shut. Through the blinding whiteness, he could see the vague outlines of two people in front of him although they were blurry and he couldn't see their faces.

In a flash, the woman was by his side, holding his hand. Even though her features were unfocused, he could tell she was smiling. The other figure, whom he assumed was the doctor, simply stood at the end of his bed, watching him, speechless.

“You woke up! Oh, I'm so happy for you!”

“Urgh-” he coughed once. He spoke in a raspy whisper since his throat still felt scratchy and numb from disuse. “Me too.”

Finally, the doctor spoke up, sounding bewildered and disbelieving. “Who are you?”

Although every other memory in his head was fuzzy, distorted, and unclear, there was one thing he knew for sure. When the doctor had said *magic wand*, one true, untarnished memory had dislodged itself from the thick mud trapping the rest. It had wandered into his consciousness like a gleaming, golden ray of sunlight, illuminating the dark corners of his mind and bringing him a feeling of peace and closure. Like a missing piece fitting snugly with the rest of the puzzle, he finally remembered his identity, his *name*. He smiled serenely at the two blurs standing before him. Now that he knew his name, it would only be a matter of time before he knew everything else about himself.

"My name," he said, "is James Evans."

**A/N - 8/1/06:**

I went back and changed something in this story. To me, it's incredibly subtle and obvious all at the same time, but hopefully you won't notice the difference. First person who notices the change wins. I'm not saying what you'll win, but you'll win something. :)

## Obliviate – Chapter Two

Albus Dumbledore's office looked the same as ever – mysterious and whimsical. However, in addition to the usual decor - spindly, metallic instruments sharing cluttered shelves with dusty old books - there was a woman's head leaning out of an emerald fire speaking to him. The old headmaster knelt down next to the hearth, listening intently, his clear blue eyes watching her with interest.

"He's awake," she murmured in a low voice. Her eyes darted from side to side, as if she was afraid of being caught.

The reply came back in an equally quiet voice, "Does he remember?"

"No."

"Good."

As the woman's head disappeared from the flames, he smiled to the room, certain that his plan had been successful.

"James," he said out loud to nobody in particular. "James, James, James. *James.*"

Although no other memories returned to him and he was still trying to piece together his own identity, he had what he thought was the most important part of it all: his name. He loved hearing the sound of it over and over again, even if he was the one saying it to himself. It was familiar to him in an odd sort of way and he still wasn't used to hearing people call him 'James,' but he figured that in time everything would return to normal.

"James!"

A young, thin woman with straight, shoulder height red hair strode up to his bed and held his hand, smiling at him. Today, her sweet, amber eyes appeared worn and somber, but at the same time they also retained their everyday warmth and kindness and he immediately relaxed in her presence. She'd told him she was a volunteer from a church group who delivered flowers to inpatients at the hospital. James told her he thought she was an angel.

"Nora." That was *her* name. He had learned it only moments after he had woken up for the first time. "You look sad."

"It's nothing..." She averted her gaze and her smile faltered slightly.

He sought her eyes with his own and patted her hand reassuringly. "Come on, you can tell me."

"Er," she mumbled hoarsely. Then she cleared her throat and said, "The doctor says you're well enough to leave by Monday."

James grinned and chuckled to himself. "I only have one more day here! We have to celebrate!" He glanced at her and noticed her silence. "What's wrong?"

She bit her lip, hesitant to break the news to him because it felt to her that if she said it out loud, it would become true. However, his calm, easy grin made her relax and she replied, "I won't be able to see you anymore."

His face fell and his grip on her hand slackened. She hastily fumbled with the clasp on her necklace and pulled the piece of jewelry off in one fluid motion, pressing it into his warm palm.

"Keep this," she whispered. It was a plain silver chain with a cross. "Try to remember me, okay?"

He beamed at her. "Of course I will."

The doctor was a short, serious-looking man with a bald patch atop his pale, pasty head. A fancy gold watch adorned his wrist and he wore black, thick-rimmed glasses which rested across the flat bridge of his nose. When he spoke, his lips barely moved and his words came out in a thin, insubstantial drone. James thought the man had never smiled in his entire life.

"Sir? Sir?"

James heard his voice but the message didn't register. "I'm sorry, what did you say?"

"We're checking you out in five minutes."

"Oh."

On the last day of his stay at the hospital, James had been handed a manila folder containing some of his personal information. He owned a flat in London. He didn't have any living relatives or a relationship of any kind. No pets. No job. The file didn't say whether or not he had any sort of social life, but he didn't expect it to. It also said that he'd been brought in by an old lady, but they didn't have her name.

James figured it wouldn't do to admit to the hospital staff that he still couldn't remember who he was, so he smiled and nodded at the men and women who visited him and examined him with curious looks and who wrote their observations in squiggly writing on brown clipboards.

Right now he was standing in the lobby of the hospital in front of a reception desk, wishing he could be talking to Nora instead. The receptionist was typing away on a computer, fingers flying across the keys, muttering to herself. Suddenly she glanced up at him.

"You're all good to go, Mister Evans."

"Thanks-"

"And here are your personal belongings," she interrupted, handing him a lumpy bag.

"Er, thanks," he repeated, surprised. Personal belongings? Hopefully something inside would be able to help him remember *something*. He held the bag close to his chest as he took cautious baby steps towards the automatic sliding doors that would lead him outside.

With a *whoosh*, the doors slid apart and he stepped into an uncertain, misty world full of unanswered questions and grey, dreary storm clouds. A light drizzle fell from the bleak heavens, half-heartedly soaking poor souls without umbrellas and dripping steadily off of the nameless city's rooftops and awnings, collecting in sad little puddles by the side of the road. Faceless pedestrians walked to and fro without a second glance at James Evans, the man who didn't know who he was. His only link to his past life was an address scrawled on

a tiny piece of paper wadded up in his pocket and his only link to his current life was Nora, a girl he didn't think he'd ever see again.

As he strolled down the sidewalk, he wondered if his life was this complicated before.

Inside the bag there was a wallet and what he figured was his house key.

There were no more clues.

“At least I have some money,” he thought to himself. He walked aimlessly down a walkway; small, quaint shops were lined up along the side with their wares stacked neatly inside wide open windows, attracting wandering eyes and reeling in stray customers. James shrugged and stepped inside one that didn't look very busy, grateful for an excuse to get out of the rain.

Inside there were rows of depressing, sterile electric lights embedded in the ceiling and rows of depressing, sterile shelves stocked with tiny cans loaded with sugar and calories. The unmanned register sat on a counter to his left, surrounded by a barricade of brightly wrapped candy bars and cigarettes. Lining the wall to his right were refrigerated bins with foggy glass doors.

He started walking down the aisles, picking out food at random, not caring what he selected so long as it was edible. When he reached the end, he turned to walk up the next aisle but a flash of red caught his attention out of the corner of his eye and he stopped, peering cautiously around the corner at a man with a rust colored mop sitting atop his head.

There was something about the man that tickled his memory, but there was nothing familiar about his face. He was an old man; his face was lined and gaunt, there were dark circles underneath his eyes, and he moved slowly, as if arthritis had taken over his joints. James leaned around further, trying to get a better view of him. Who was he? Why had this man caught his attention?

Suddenly he looked up and saw James standing there, hanging awkwardly around a display case, staring at him.

“Is there something you want?” he asked bluntly in an utterly unfamiliar, gruff, old man voice.

“No sir,” James replied and he shook his head before spinning around and hurrying back up the aisle.

“What was I thinking?” he muttered to himself as he quickly paid for his items and slipped back out into the rain.

His flat was not a memory jogger.

He entered through the front door, expecting to immediately be assaulted by memories and images, but the house felt dead and empty to him. It was neat and tidy and there weren't very many possessions lying out anywhere. As he roamed from room to room, James felt as if it was the first time he'd ever set foot in the building. When he finally reached his bedroom his eyes swept over the bed, the nightstand, and his dresser – and he had a feeling that he'd never lived here before.

Things were too well kept for his liking, and if he knew one thing about himself for sure, it was that he was not a very organized person. The surrounding neatness just felt stifling and uncomfortable and he didn't like it.

Before he could ponder the mystery that was his life any longer, a phone rang from a distant room, and he darted through his house, searching for the handset. Finally, he found the phone in his kitchen and he eagerly picked it up.

“Hello?” he asked breathlessly.

“James?”

“Yes!” he shouted into the phone. He cringed and nervously scratched the back of his neck before he replied in a quieter voice, “Er, yeah.”

“It's Nathan. I need you to come into work on Saturday this week.”

“Right. Er, where at?”

Over the phone he heard a sigh. "What's the matter with you? Did you hit your head or something? I need you at the *warehouse*."

"Okay," he responded, still unsure of where he was supposed to go. "What am I going to be doing?"

This time he heard a laugh. "What do you mean 'what am I going to be doing?' What do you *think* you're going to be doing?"

"Uh..."

"You're moving shit around." At least the voice sounded amused and not angry with him. "Like you do every other day of the flippin' year."

"Okay..." he answered. He frowned, suddenly wondering *where* the warehouse was. "Hey, wait-"

"Let's see... you'll be working with... *Sam*." The voice at the other end of the line ignored him. "Alright, Saturday! Six in the morning! Don't be late!"

*Click.*

James had eventually discovered some of his old earnings statements which fortunately included an address for his place of employment. When Saturday came around, he found himself pulling into a gravel parking lot to a warehouse about twenty minutes out of the city in a car that was his but felt like someone else's. He reluctantly walked up to a side door of the building and stepped inside.

"James!" someone called.

A young man with untidy hair and a potbelly rushed over to him. He was covered in dust and there was dirt or grease covering his face. James couldn't tell which.

"Good thing you're here, we just got a new shipment in..."

And so James' first day at work began. They carried boxes from trucks to shelves to skids to shelves to trucks again and at the end of



it all, James sagged into a stiff chair, covered in sweat and dirt. He looked over at his partner and he asked him, "Sam, why am I here?"

Sam chuckled and wiped his brow with a dirty rag. "Don't we all wonder that question sometimes? You're, what – nineteen? Twenty?"

James closed his eyes and nodded, not sure exactly how old he was. "Yeah."

"I guess you didn't think college was important either," Sam said. Then he shrugged and he added, "The pay's not bad here."

James shifted in his seat and looked at Sam with a thoughtful expression, feeling something tingling in the back of his mind. A memory? "No, I mean... I just thought I'd learned something useful back in school, you know? Like... like what I'd learned would be my *future*."

His partner grinned and shook his head. "Nah, they don't teach you anything worth remembering in school." Sam sighed and tilted his head back, a wistful look coming across his features. "The only thing I ever cared about back then were my friends. Still do." He shot James a sidelong glance. "You still keep in touch with your old friends too?"

"I-" He closed his mouth, suddenly at a loss for words. Friends... hadn't he had them at one point in time? He could have sworn that he'd had friends so close they were worth *dying* for... If he still *did* have friends, then why hadn't any of them tried to call him over the week at all? Had they all had a falling out of sorts? Where were they now? James stared at the floor and slowly shook his head.

"Aw, it's okay." Sam said reassuringly. "You've still got me to kick around."

Over the next few days, James began to wonder more and more about his friends, or rather, his conspicuous lack of any of them. One morning he stopped in front of the mirror and asked himself, "I'm really not so bad, am I?"

On his quest to answer his question, he stopped by neighbor's houses, participating in the banality of exchanging pleasantries,

looking for any flicker or sign from them that they were friends, not just two blokes who lived next door to each other. However, as time went on, he found nothing and he started to lose hope that they could be a key to his identity.

James even gave up searching his house for clues, frustrated that he could not find a single photo album, yearbook, or anything else that might shed some light onto his darkened past. It was as if up until his stay at the hospital, James Evans had not even existed.

It was the second Sunday since he had been home. The first Sunday had been taken up by a time consuming, obsessive search of his house for any hints of his past. By now though, he had tired of the impossible hunt and he resigned himself to hoping that one day his memory would come back by itself. So in the meantime he decided to move on with life, and since it was a Sunday, he woke up early, dressed himself in his finest, and set off to go to church.

"I need to feel *normal*," he said to himself as he got into his car.

He listened to classical music and jazz on the wireless as he drove to a church he remembered spotting on his way home from the hospital. It was a lifeless, modern building with a low roof and plushy, padded pews. James felt out of place among the dozens of young, trendy couples and their crying babies. The pastor droned on about a story of a diver who saw a cross and he regretted his idealistic yearning to feel normal again.

However, as quickly as it started, the service was over, and James stood up along with everyone else as they shuffled along towards the doors like a herd of sheep. In the background, a contemporary church band made up of scruffy-looking teenagers played something that sounded incredibly unlike a church hymn and he stared at an overly elaborate jeweled belt that the woman standing in front of him wore around her waist. He resisted the urge to yawn, feeling it would be highly inappropriate to do so in a church on a Sunday, and he impatiently craned his neck to see over the crowd, anxious to leave the hot, stuffy building.

And then he saw her. Nora O'Connor, his angel.

She was standing outside the main doors, smiling and shaking hands as the congregation exited. James subtly allowed the sheep to push past him until he stood at the back of the line, where he nervously chewed the inside of his cheek and felt his palms become sweaty as he drew nearer to Nora.

At last he reached the doors and was staring at her pretty face and holding a clammy hand out to clasp hers. When their hands met, he gave hers a gentle squeeze and her eyes went wide with recognition as they moved up and locked with his. James grinned at her winningly.

"It's nice to see you again," he said.

**A/N**

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**8/12/06:**

Bonus points to anyone who can tell me where I got the character names for James' work peers.

### Obliviate – Chapter Three

“...James?” She blinked. “What are you doing here?”

He gestured for him to walk with her outside to the parking lot. “Follow me.”

They slipped out through the doors, holding hands, unnoticed by the crowd. James felt an uneasy sensation settling in his stomach as he studied her out of the corner of his eye: rather than appearing happy at seeing him, she seemed nervous or apprehensive; he noticed she was still smiling but there was something fixed about her expression and it didn't seem real to him. She saw him glancing at her worriedly and she stared stubbornly at the ground. What was going on?

Once they stood outside in the parking lot, he gently gripped her shoulders and asked in a quiet voice, “You alright?”

Nora blinked again and nodded, keeping her mouth closed. A slight frown pulled at his lips and he peered intently at her face, feeling as if he was trying to decipher a code. James furrowed a brow and tried to lift her chin up with his finger but she shook her head and shoved his hand away. He took a wary step backward, unsure of what was running through her mind or what he should do.

“James,” her voice came out in a hoarse whisper, “don't come here again.”

“But-”

Without bothering to hear his reply, she swung around and strode away from him, leaving him standing there, baffled and alone.

James decided not to put any more time into puzzling over her odd behavior the rest of the week. What was done was done; she no longer wanted to see him and he accepted that. Maybe she'd only developed a crush on him because he had been a helpless, bedridden inpatient – not because of who he *really* was, which was, ironically enough, another thing he was still trying to figure out.

He was driving back home after a short day at work, humming out of tune and enjoying the refreshing ripples of wind coming in through the open windows.

“Nora...” he said softly to himself. “Ah, well. You were a nice distraction...”

James parked his car on the side of the street and stepped out, smiling at the beautiful weather. Today was a new day - a new beginning for his new self. It was time to start living his life for himself, the new James Evans, not the old one who had disappeared three weeks ago.

He'd decided to visit London today to see the sights, just to get out a little. Who cared if he looked like a tourist in his home city? Not James Evans. With an easy gait and his hands tucked casually into the pockets of a hooded sweater, he wandered calmly down a busy walkway, savoring the early autumn weather and its crisp, cool breeze.

Over the course of the day he lost himself in the city's sights, wondering to himself if he'd ever seen them before in his past life. He visited Eltham Palace, admiring the tasteful blend of features from medieval times and the 1930's; he explored the HMS Belfast, an old World War Two cruiser converted into a museum; he also made sure to stop in and check out all manner of smaller stores and coffee shops.

Gradually the sun's rays faded from gold to orange and slowly sank below the horizon; magnificent, fiery streaks crossed the sky and evening settled in over London. James wanted to explore the nightlife of the city as well, so he raised a hand to hail a taxi and one instantly came swerving around into sight, as if it had been waiting for him. He clambered into the vehicle, feeling exhausted but still wanting to continue on his adventure.

The driver looked at him expectantly and his eyes narrowed for a fraction of a second as they darted up to his forehead and then back to his face.

“What's that all about?” James wondered to himself. Out loud he said in a weary voice, “Take me somewhere...” He sat still, thinking for a moment. “Somewhere I can get drunk,” he finished with a mischievous grin.

“Right you are, sir!” the driver exclaimed. James could have sworn the man winked at him but he'd already shifted the car into gear and was driving them down the road haphazardly, slipping between buses and cars with ease, avoiding traffic like a magician.

He relaxed back into the seat and closed his eyes, letting out a deep breath he didn't know he'd been holding. London was quite a city, and to imagine this was where he *lived*. Everything seemed so *new* to him it felt impossible that he'd ever lived here before. Perhaps he'd only moved here recently from outside the city? The meager one page file he'd received from the hospital hadn't listed any of his living history so he had no way of knowing for sure.

Suddenly, the taxi jolted to a stop and James lurched forward in his seat, smacking his head against the headrest in front of him.

Rubbing his nose tenderly, he said to the driver, “You really ought to give a fair warning before you do that.” He shook his head and looked out the window. “What's this?”

“This, sir, is *The Leaky Cauldron*.”

James squinted and pressed his still sore nose up to the window, trying to get a better view of the building. From what he could see, it was a run down establishment, looking as if it had been constructed a few centuries ago and never taken care of over the years.

“Are you sure this place is decent? It looks a little, er – *dodgy*.”

The driver merely shook his head and chuckled. “Don't worry, it's the best place around for our type.”

James still felt a little disoriented from their sudden stop and that last remark slid by his ears unheard. “Alright, how much do I owe you?” he asked, pulling his wallet out.

The other man waved his hands in front of him, refusing his payment. "No sir, I can't accept your money – not after what you've done for us all."

He gave the driver an odd look and narrowed his eyes slightly, trying to understand the cryptic comment, but he shrugged and stepped out of the taxi, slamming the door shut behind him, glad to be rid of his presence.

"The Leaky Cauldron, eh?" He paused before the bar, gazing up at the battered old sign hanging overhead. "Let's see what you've got in store for me..."

Meanwhile a young woman stared dejectedly into a burning fire, fearing another encounter with the strange man who lived in the hearth. Or at least she *thought* he lived there. Nora couldn't be absolutely certain as she'd checked her fireplace thoroughly at least a dozen times since he'd first popped out, appearing as if he was stepping off a train.

The first time he'd arrived, she'd been in her kitchen, preparing dinner for herself when she suddenly became aware of the smell of smoke.

"That's odd," she muttered to herself as she checked around the room. "The oven's not on..."

She followed the scent to her living room where, to her surprise, there was a fire burning merrily in the hearth, as if it had been tended to with loving care over the last few hours. But nobody else was home. In fact nobody else even *lived* with her and she was sure that she hadn't lit the fire herself. She was especially certain of that last fact because the fire wasn't just a normal collage of gold and crimson – it was a bright, sparkling, vibrant *green*.

No, she definitely wasn't responsible for lighting that fire.

And then, moments later, she felt her heart beating madly in her chest as an old, wizened face appeared in the flames. A man with curiously shaped spectacles, twinkling blue eyes, and a lengthy, snow white beard was sitting *in her fire*, and he was smiling benignly up at her.

“Good evening, Miss O'Connor,” he said politely in a rich, resonant voice. “Do you mind if I come through? It can become quite uncomfortable kneeling on the floor for very long at my age,” he added with a wink.

Utterly bewildered and sensing that the man (however strange he seemed to be) did not mean any harm, she nodded silently and stepped aside. She watched in astonishment as his face retreated for a second and then she saw him *spin* – for there was no other word for it – in the flames and hop out a second later. He nonchalantly brushed his clothes off, which appeared to her to be some sort of fancy, purple nightgown adorned with faintly shimmering yellow stars.

“Ah, your hospitality is very much appreciated,” he said genially, beaming at her. Then with another wink, he added, “My knees aren't what they used to be.”

Nora managed a weak nod and stood in place, trying to overcome the shock of seeing such a peculiar man standing before her, looking around her living room with curiosity.

“W-would you like a cup of tea?” she asked, feeling strangely compelled to be a good host, since she had no idea what else she could do. She couldn't call the police – what would she say? *Oh, hello, I have an emergency... yes, a man jumped out of my fireplace...*

“That would be lovely,” he replied. “Oh dear, where are my manners?” The eccentrically dressed man straightened his shoulders and extended a wrinkled hand to her, shaking hers with surprising strength. “My name is Albus Dumbledore, Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.”

He said all of this while maintaining his charming smile and Nora felt herself feeling more curious than scared. She cocked her head and gave him a skeptical look. “Did you just say you're a *wizard*?”

Dumbledore nodded and strode past her into the kitchen, his violet robes gliding along behind him. He gave the room a once over and sat down in a seat, conjured up a tray with two cups of steaming tea, and offered one to her. She accepted it with a weak hand, feeling her breath catch in the back of her throat.



“Yes, at Hogwarts our pupils learn a vast array of spells and charms that help them to become successful witches and wizards.”

Nora kept her mouth shut. She didn't feel up to arguing with the crazy man that witchcraft was a *sin*.

“Please, have a seat.” He motioned to the chair across from him at the table. She sat down without a word, feeling slightly put off by being offered tea and to have a seat in her own home. “Now,” Dumbledore lowered his voice conspiratorially as he spoke, “if you'll listen carefully, I have a proposal for you...”

The headmaster had gone on to explain to her about a special young man by the name of James Evans who would soon be arriving at the hospital she volunteered at. Dumbledore offered her a considerable sum of money to simply keep watch over James and report his progress back to him. It had been a simple enough job except she hadn't counted one thing: developing a crush on James.

As he rested in the hospital for days on end, he looked so fragile and in need of a warm smile – she was willing to do anything to help him feel better. Then he had woken up and she had felt her attraction for him grow as she got to know him better. She gradually became familiar with the way he smiled at her when she entered the room, the way his crystal clear emerald eyes would focus on her, the soft touch of his hand on hers...

Too soon he had been discharged and her volunteer work at the hospital was complete; she had no way of finding him and she didn't know if he would ever bother to find her, until she had seen him at her *church*, of all places. Her initial reaction had been to smile and give him a hug, but Dumbledore had warned her about James – she shouldn't ever get too close to him because he was dangerous... but how could her sweet, innocent James pose any threat to her? It was *inconceivable*. Nonetheless, she'd found herself resolutely pushing him away, refusing to even talk to him. Her only hope was that he'd move on and continue to live his own, happy life.

Nora wanted to see James again but she was also a little wary – she didn't know what Dumbledore would do to her if he found out she hadn't stuck to her side of the deal. After all, he was a wizard who

could travel through fireplaces and she was, well, she was just plain old Nora.

The inside of The Leaky Cauldron was dimly lit by candles which hung from the ceiling on strings so thin they appeared to be floating in midair; the clientèle huddled to the stools by the bar, cradling mugs of beer and ale. Ancient wooden floorboards creaked and groaned under James' feet and the air inside smelled a little musty, as if the place hadn't ever been aired out. All he could hear was the low murmur of quiet conversation and the sounds of faintly clinking silverware – not what he had expected from a place such as this. Nobody paid him any attention as he crossed through the threshold and ambled up to the bar, not feeling completely comfortable being there alone.

What had that taxi driver been thinking? The bar was a *dodge*.

James noticed with a bit of apprehension that everybody else in the room was dressed in what looked like long, flowing bathrobes of various colors with different designs on them.

“How queer,” he muttered to himself, observing a rough looking man wearing a bright blue robe.

And then he noticed what was going on behind the bar.

While the bartender was leaning over in a corner pouring all sorts of bizarrely colored liquids into a tall glass, there were dozens of mugs spinning by themselves atop the counter behind the bar, being wiped clean and polished to shining perfection by floating rags. James stared in fascination at the scene before him until he was unexpectedly bumped into from behind.

“Excuse-” he began.

“Excuse me-” The man who'd bumped into him stopped in mid-sentence, gaping at him with his jaw hanging open. “It *can't* be,” he murmured. Then, in a louder, more excited voice he repeated, “It can't be!”

Everyone sitting at the bar swiveled around on their stools to stare at him and even some of the people scattered about at the tables stopped what they were doing to see what the commotion was all about. The room went nearly silent as James could hear muffled gasps and whispers leaking out and bouncing about gleefully all around him.

Then the bartender looked up from what he was doing and grinned at him.

“Well,” he bellowed out for all to hear, “if it isn't Harry Potter!” He cheerfully raised his mug in the air and James saw other people in the bar hastily copy the motion. “Welcome back home!”

## Obliviate – Chapter Four

“*Excuse me?*” he repeated for the second time that night. All around the bar people were blatantly staring at him and gaping. Then he vigorously shook his head and waved his hands dismissively in front of him. “No, I'm afraid you've got the wrong man...”

A few of the patrons exchanged hesitant glances with each other, looking as if they were suddenly doubtful of his real identity. James tried to make eye contact with as many people as possible, trying to convince them that he wasn't *Harry Potter*, that he was only James Evans, a poor bloke who worked in a warehouse for a living moving boxes around.

An old woman with wild, sheer white hair pointed at him rudely and cried out, “But you've got the scar!”

Scattered *ooh*'s and *aah*'s filled the tavern and James once more felt his cheeks turning a brilliant shade of red. He looked around the room, desperate for any support at all. Perhaps even *one* person would be able to see that he wasn't anybody special and stop the figurative spotlight from shining on him. After all, James never wanted to be anything special – he only wanted to be normal.

He spotted movement at the bar and a tall man slid off of his stool and ambled over to him. The man reverently pulled his hat off his head and nervously held it in unsteady hands.

“Mister Potter,” he mumbled. “You can have my seat, if you'd like-”

“Whatever,” he replied in a low voice as he rolled his eyes, still gazing about warily at the patrons sneaking not so inconspicuous glances at him.

He made his way over to the bar and was immediately confronted by the bartender, a smiling, hunchbacked man with a lazy eye.

“Mister Potter-” he began.

“Enough!” James snapped. “My name is *James*, not Harry, and I would like you to call me that instead.”

He glared defiantly at the bartender, whose smile only wavered for a moment before he bowed his head and answered, "Of course... *James*. What can I get you?"

James noticed a few other people sitting next to him were staring at him with their mouths hanging open.

"What!" he shouted. He was forced to suppress a smirk as they all winced at his tone of voice. "Leave me alone!"

Then he noticed the bartender was still looking at him expectantly. James scratched his chin as he thought about what he wanted to have. He just wanted something simple, something that would help him to wash away his worries and help him to forget that he forgot who he was...

"I'll have a screwdriver," he stated boldly.

"A *what* driver?" the bartender asked incredulously, a wry grin spreading across his face.

The woman sitting next to him snorted, spilling her drink all over the bar and turned away from him. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed that a rag had floated up by itself and it began wiping at the spill.

"Er, you know... orange juice and vodka... er, that *is* a screwdriver, isn't it?"

To his surprise, the bartender laughed uproariously, drawing the stares of more than a few people around the room.

"No, Mister Potter, you'll be wanting something a bit stiffer... something more suited to *our* type, if you know what I mean."

With a mischievous grin and a wink, Tom the bartender disappeared behind the shiny counter. James stared with disbelief as a glass floated out from the bar and sat itself in front of him. Then he watched with fascination as three more bottles floated over from the shelves in front of him and started pouring their contents into his glass.

"There you go, Mister Potter," Tom said, looking at the drink proudly. "A Screaming Banshee. Better down it before-"

Suddenly the glass started to shake violently and an unnatural, high-pitched noise that sounded like a woman's *scream* filled the tavern. James' gaze flicked nervously around the bar, but the most attention he drew was from a few grizzled old bar patrons who gave him short glances of annoyance. Without really thinking at all, he grasped the cool glass in his trembling fingers and swallowed the entire drink in one gulp. Instantly the shrieking stopped.

"*Finally*," the woman next to him burst out. She sounded fairly drunk. She toppled precariously in her seat as she gestured grandly and then she said, "You may have saved the world, but you sure as hell don't know how to drink!"

He arched his eyebrows at her inquisitively and opened his mouth to ask her what she meant but before he could speak, his hand was being shaken rather vigorously by a strangely garbed man who seemed to appear out of nowhere. This man had close-cropped dark hair atop his head, pasty white skin, and his lips seemed to be curved down into a perpetual frown. He spoke quickly and smoothly.

"Mister Potter, may I have a few words?"

"Sure I-"

"Thank you, sir." The man hoisted himself onto an empty bar stool next to him. "I'm Morris Freeley, Wizard's Digest. Mind if I use Quick-Write?"

"Um-"

"Thank you again, sir." He plucked a quill out from somewhere in his robes and it hovered in midair over a blank piece of parchment. "So, Mister Potter, after your heroic defeat of-"

"Mister Potter!" cried a silky smooth voice from across the room. Morris turned to look at the new arrival and scowled.

A woman wearing an obnoxiously green robe sauntered over to where they were sitting, a smug smile stretched out across her face.

"Miss Skeeter. *Always* a pleasure," he said, not bothering to try and hide his obvious disgust at the mere sight of her.

"Mister Freeley." She jerked her head at him in a quick acknowledgment before swiveling her head around to stare at James, regarding him through her thick glasses. "Harry Potter... I'm Rita Skeeter, from the Daily Prophet. You may remember me..."

"My name's James-" he tried to say, but he was interrupted once again as there was a loud *pop* from right next to him and, spinning in from nothingness, came a short woman wearing a neon pink robe.

*Was there really that much alcohol in my drink...?*

"Harry Potter!" squeaked the lady in pink, nearly toppling over herself in an effort to move closer to him. She thrust a stubby, bejeweled hand out at him. "Patricia Patinson, Witch Weekly! May I have a-"

But she was unable to finish her sentence as a short girl with long, unkempt blonde hair wandered over towards the battling journalists and smiled plainly at James, choosing instead to give him a warm hug instead of a handshake. There was something familiar about the girl but James couldn't put his finger on what it was about her.

The blonde-haired girl smiled dreamily up at him and he noticed that there was a chain necklace of what looked like beer bottle caps hanging from her neck.

"I'm Luna Lovegood, from the Quibbler." She looked at him and smiled once again. "I went to school with you and we're *friends*."

*I'm friends with... with this girl? She might be able to help me remember more about my past!*

"Oh... yes... *Luna*, right, er- I remember you," he stated. He hoped he didn't sound too unconvincing. The other journalists had fallen silent and were now staring back and forth between him and the mysterious girl, sensing that their quarry was about to make a daring escape.

"Want to get out of here?" she asked helpfully.

"Yes!"

"Follow me," she said as she took his hand and led him out of The Leaky Cauldron and away from dozens of people who thought he was Harry Potter.

Pale moonbeams and flickering electrical lanterns guided their way down the cracked city sidewalk. Aside from the two of them, there was not a single other soul out roaming the streets. The emptiness and peacefulness surrounding them conflicted madly with James' thoughts and feelings; he was scared and confused about what had happened back at the bar. Who was Harry Potter? Why did everyone think that he, James Evans, was this famous person?

James chanced a sidelong glance at his odd companion and he sighed gratefully as he noticed for the first time that unlike the others in the tavern, she was dressed *normally*. She hummed as she walked along the pathway by his side, and he thought for a moment that he recognized the tune, but he shook his head when he couldn't remember it.

"So," he mumbled, as he fidgeted with his fingers. He felt lame and not quite sure of what he was supposed to be doing and he wished he had something more interesting to say to Luna.

"So," she replied evenly, not bothering to look at him or stop humming. Then she said rather plainly, "I don't think you have to worry about the Prying Pixies anymore."

James halted in his steps and gave her a quizzical stare. "The *what* pixies?"

She looked around suspiciously and then she leaned in earnestly and whispered in his ear, "Prying Pixies! They follow you around and try to learn embarrassing facts about you."

"*Right*," he answered, feeling dumb as well as lame now. What was going on tonight? Who were all these strange people? Who was *she*? And what on earth were Prying Pixies? James dimly noticed out of



the corner of his eye that she had started walking again and he had to jog a little to catch up.

As he reached her side, she raised an eyebrow at him. "I don't think you have to keep pretending you're *James*..." she remarked with a wink.

"I... pretending?"

To his surprise, Luna chuckled.

"You're really good at this, Har- oops!" she stifled another giggle, clutching a hand to her mouth. "I mean *James*."

He felt his patience starting to wear thin with this strange girl and his lips curved down into an annoyed pout. Even though she might be behaving oddly, he decided to play along – how else would he ever learn more about himself?

"Yeah, well thanks to *you*, they all know who I am now."

She gently nudged him the ribs and he saw her grin. "Oh, I've *missed* you, Harry! Where have you been all this time?"

James frowned, uncertain of how much he should tell Luna. Then again, there really wasn't *that* much he had to tell her, since he remembered so little. He shrugged noncommittally.

"Oh, here and there. You know how it is."

She pursed her lips together and her smile wavered ever so slightly.

Did she suspect something? James warred with himself on the inside, torn over whether or not he should go for broke and admit to her that he didn't know who he was. Should he keep on pretending and gather more information that way? What if he didn't learn anything and then she left and he never saw her again? Maybe he should tell her *everything* – but no, that might not be a good idea because she might think he was crazy! Well, in a way, he *was* crazy...

"You're trying to decide about something but you don't know what to do."

The unexpected comment jarred him out his mental dilemma.

"Yes," he said simply, not knowing what else to say, feeling her unblinking stare coming to rest on him.

Luna peered at him closely. In a quiet, serious voice she asked, "Is everything okay, Harry?"

Their eyes met for a brief moment and in that instant James felt like he could *trust* this girl, whoever she was – whoever she had been in his life before.

"No." The truth slid out from his mouth again before he could stop himself, but he didn't care. Lies and half-truths could have only carried him so far anyway. He knew honesty would have to come sooner or later with Luna – and it looked like it was coming sooner.

She nodded pensively.

"I thought not," she replied softly, more to herself than to James. "Let's find somewhere more private, shall we?"

Luna craned her neck from side to side, scanning the street to make sure they weren't being observed. She grasped his arm and pulled him into the shadow of a building.

"Luna-"

"This is the only way," she said, going on as if she hadn't heard him. "The wards won't let you in unless you come with me."

"*What?*" he blurted out in bewilderment.

Even in the darkness of the shadow he could see her smiling apologetically.

"Sorry, I never bothered to remove them when the war ended..."

If James felt confused before, he felt utterly lost and ignorant now. *A war...?* Luna reached into a pocket and withdrew a long piece of wood. *And why is she carrying around a drumstick?* She held it firmly in one hand and muttered under her breath with her eyes closed, seeming as if she was trying to concentrate on remembering something. Suddenly she exhaled and opened her eyes while squeezing his arm excitedly.

“Ah! I just remembered the incantation that'll keep *you* from getting splinched,” she said cryptically. She raised her drumstick in the air and pulled James closer to her. “Now, I know how much you hate Side-Along Apparition, but it's the only way...”

Before he could say anything else, Luna brought her drumstick down in a sharp downward motion and the ground dropped out from beneath them. Although the world around them disappeared, James could determine from the wildly swirling colors zipping by them that they were spinning. Every inch of his body felt like it was being compressed, squashed underneath some unrelenting force and he panicked when he couldn't breathe-

And then it was over. The ground had helpfully decided to return and the world finally stopped twirling about in circles, allowing James a moment to regain his balance – and what he saw astonished him. He carefully disentangled his white-knuckled hands from Luna's arm and examined his surroundings in wonderment.

Gone was the dark and lonely London street. He now found himself standing in the middle of a bright and cheerful foyer – an elegant golden chandelier floated above their heads and he spied a staircase winding up and up and *up* over where they were standing. Luna gestured for him to follow her further into the house and he heard his footsteps clicking loudly upon the polished, wood floors. Fancy candelabra hung from the walls and bathed the hallways in their warm glow as they passed by; James couldn't escape the feeling that he should have wiped his feet before entering. Along the way, he admired the beautiful paintings scattered about the house in various places and he narrowed his eyes when he thought he saw a portrait stick its tongue out at him.

After what seemed to James like several minutes had passed, Luna finally came to a stop.

"We can talk in private," she pointed as she held a door open. "In here."

He walked through the threshold and stepped into... something else.

"Luna," James asked evenly, masking his shock, "what is this place?"

He felt her brush against his arm slightly as she moved by him to stand before him.

"This," she said as she stretched her arms out, "is my room!"

James could only gape in amazement at the sight before him and he barely noticed as Luna eagerly took his hand in hers and boldly treaded onward.

Albus Dumbledore frowned as he stroked his silver beard. He leaned closer to the portrait, wondering if he had heard wrong.

"Forgive me if I'm mistaken," he began, trying to sound amused in an effort to cover up the sudden tension which had gripped his body moments ago when he had heard the news. "Did you say... *Harry Potter* has been sighted at The Leaky Cauldron?"

The man in the portrait, a short, stocky man with a bald head and a scruffy beard nodded an affirmative as he crossed his tattooed arms over his chest.

"I know what I seen," he growled before he tilted his head to the side and spit somewhere beneath the portrait's frame. "I also know what I heard, and everyone was talkin' about it, so mark my words, it's true!"

Dumbledore inhaled and exhaled slowly, keeping his breathing slow and preventing himself from showing any signs of excitement.

"Thank you, Otis," he responded, turning away from the former owner of The Leaky Cauldron and stepping over to his desk. The rush of adrenaline and exhilaration was gone – replaced now by an

overwhelming sense of weariness. Dumbledore slid his spectacles off and rubbed tiredly at his temple, wondering how he was going to react to this startling new development.

He snapped his fingers and strode over to the fireplace.

“Of course. I don't know why I didn't think of it sooner,” he muttered to himself. The headmaster took a pinch of floo powder and stood in front of the fire. “I believe it's time I paid another visit to dear Nora...”

**A/N 9/10/06:**

Sorry this took so long to post, at least in comparison to how quickly I was able to submit the other three chapters. Please read and review:)

## Obliviate – Chapter 5

Another evening without anything to do meant another boring, lonely night reading a book by the fire. Or rather, that's what it had meant in the past. Ever since Albus Dumbledore, the odd man who lived in her fireplace, had unexpectedly entered her home a few weeks ago, Nora had avoided lighting any fires when at all possible. Sitting in her comfy chair and relaxing in the warmth of the fire was half the novelty of staying home in the first place – now that she was afraid to use the fireplace, the prospect of reading in her bedroom was quite dull indeed.

Nora looked disapprovingly at her watch. It was seven o'clock. She sighed and tapped the face, hoping the arms would magically wind around and right themselves to a more suitable hour. It couldn't *really* only be seven – there wasn't anything to do! A slight frown spread across her lips and she stared dejectedly at her reflection in a mirror hanging on a nearby wall.

“Nora,” she said wearily to herself. “You're twenty years old and living on your own. Why aren't you out partying?”

Silence followed her question and served as a sour reminder that she was alone.

She wandered over into her sitting room and fell back into her favorite armchair, drawing her knees up to her chest and resting her chin atop the backs of her hands. What was she doing with herself?

*Nothing.*

Somewhere along the way in her teens, her conservative mother had convinced her that pursuing a higher education was a waste of time and that she should stay close to home. Nora had protested strongly in the beginning but she had gradually lost the war of attrition. Although they had both lived under the same roof, the battle had been fought on her mother's home turf; every day the woman had found a way to sneak in a jab against Nora.

“Nora,” she'd say, “you wouldn't ever leave your dear old mother here to look after herself, would you?”

She had played the guilt card against her daughter brilliantly, especially since Nora didn't want to study just anywhere – she'd wanted to travel, to see the world, to be somewhere else and immerse herself in an entirely different culture. France, Egypt, Japan, Brazil, America – it wouldn't have mattered where. Just so long as she was somewhere outside Britain. But fate had had something else in mind for Nora, and two and a half years later, she found herself not in Paris or Kyoto, but instead living in a flat barely a mile away from her mother.

How quickly the hopes and dreams of youth could be crushed by the depressing confines of the real world. Sometimes Nora wished she could go back to the days when she was fifteen or sixteen, the days when her war hadn't already been lost and when she might have had even a marginal say in her future.

Those days were gone. She was an adult, living alone now, albeit within arms reach of her mother's flat. But she was finally on her own, which meant it was up to *her* to make decisions for herself. So what was she going to do?

While she and her mother didn't always see eye to eye on many subjects, they had always managed to put aside their differences one day of every week and go to church. And so at the moment, being an active church-goer and volunteer was the only thing Nora had in her life besides her mother and her job working retail.

However, those things could only take up so much time on their own; the rest of the time she wasted lazing about her house aimlessly, hoping, wishing, dreaming that a knight would come riding into her life to sweep her off her feet and take her away from her dreary existence.

Fleeting and ever so tantalizingly that knight had rode into the picture in the form of a poor yet handsome young man with amnesia who just so happened to be in one of the hospital wards she used to visit.

James. James Evans.

Just *thinking* about him made her feel dizzy. He had been a shimmering light in the distance for her, a sparkling, tangible *hope*.

James hadn't been quite *hers* yet, so he hadn't been something her overbearing mother would've been able to wrench away from her.

Yet he had still managed to be pulled out of her life despite that fact; except this time instead of her mother interfering with her life, it had been that odd fellow Albus Dumbledore. She supposed she couldn't complain – after all, he had been very generous with his payment and she was poor and uneducated, living modestly on her own...

"Perhaps it's time to go spend some of my earnings," she stated to the empty room.

"An excellent idea, if I do say so myself."

Apparently the room was not as empty as she'd thought it was. Her eyes flicked over to the hearth, taking in the fact that where once there had been ash and dust lying behind a closed gate, there was now that unnerving green fire burning bright as if it had been there all along. Slowly she turned around in her seat to see the damnable fireplace creature himself, standing tall in her kitchen in his brilliant violet robes. He regarded her with a slight smile and she felt uneasy in his presence. Weren't intruders supposed to make one feel afraid? Dumbledore had this insufferable ability to make her feel comfortable no matter what. She quickly tore her gaze away from his captivating blue eyes, fearful of any mind games he might be trying to play on her.

"Headmaster," she said calmly, "I wasn't expecting to see you so soon..."

Actually, Nora hadn't expected to see him ever again. She had only assumed Dumbledore had held the same assumption.

"My dear Nora," he replied genially, smiling more widely and stretching his arms out in a gesture of openness and trust. "It seems that events beyond my control have conspired to have us meet again."

*Typical*, she thought. *He knows full well what he's doing.*



"What do you want this time?" she asked bluntly, not caring for this façade of familiarity and friendship.

His eyebrows arched up in surprise and he placed a hand delicately over his chest. "Why must we dispense with the pleasantries this time around? Come, let me offer you a cup of tea..."

She resisted the urge to roll her eyes. Three times he had arrived unannounced, uninvited, in her hearth in a magical swirl of emerald flame and sparks; three times he had proceeded to offer her tea. In her own house.

"No thanks," she answered sweetly, waving a hand in front of her. "Please," she said, feigning tiredness as she faked a yawn, "let's just get down to business."

Dumbledore peered at her for a moment, unblinking, unmoving, still caught midway in the motion of waving his hand about to conjure up a tray of tea. At last an easy smile broke out across his face and his posture relaxed as he strode over to where she was sitting.

"Of course," was his simple reply. He stopped a polite distance away from her and suddenly his appearance was grim and his voice was grave. "Nora," he closed his eyes and paused. Whether or not the expression was genuine, it had worked and she found herself moving closer to the edge of her seat, anxious to hear what the old wizard had to say. "I'm afraid I haven't been completely honest with you."

Immediately her eyes hardened and her mouth set itself into a thin line.

But there was an earnestness, a twinge of regret, an overwhelming sense of fatigue – there was at least *something* so subtle in his demeanor that she felt herself wanting to believe him. Yet, at the same time...

Dumbledore sighed and suddenly the steadying aura of invincibility and confidence around him vanished and he appeared to be nothing more special than a frail old man wearing a quirky purple bathrobe. His gaze wandered over to the ailing fire, which had reverted back to its normal hues of crimson and orange and looked just as tired as he.

With a casual grace he pointed at the flames and they sprang back to life, dancing spiritedly in place.

"This is going to take some time," he warned.

Nora raised her chin slightly. "Start at the beginning."

He nodded and after another moment's pause, he said, "I am going to tell you the story of a remarkable child by the name of Harry Potter."

James and Luna leaned back against the thick trunk of a towering oak tree situated in the middle of a vast, grassy field. It was neither too hot nor too cold where they were and a slight, sweet breeze tickled the leaves hanging over them and brought a calming sensation over him. Overhead, the sky hung precariously between afternoon and twilight – one side was awash with vibrant, brilliant colors which made it appear as it were on fire and the other was a deep, violet-cerulean canvas sprinkled with glittering stars and faintly shining nebulae. Through some trick of magic, a divine, shimmering ring circled the sky, stretching from horizon to horizon. Two moons sailed along the sea of stars impossibly close to the planet, each with swirling rings of their own.

As strange as it seemed to him, this was Luna's bedroom. She had explained to him that her mother had done the unique enchantments on it herself before she had passed away, and she'd simply never had the heart to change it from the way it was. He silently agreed with her decision.

After a while of not saying anything, James broke the silence.

"It's beautiful, Luna. It really is." He tore his gaze away from the stars for a moment to shoot a sidelong glance her way. "I could spend hours out here just staring at it."

"Yeah..." she replied, sounding preoccupied. "I always come out here when I need to relax." Luna sighed as she idly played with a strand of her long blonde hair. She lowered her voice as she said, "Are you... are you ready to talk now?"

James snapped out of his stargazing and looked at his feet.

"You don't have to say anything if you don't want to," she said quickly, pulling her eyes from him.

"No, I need to come clean and tell you the truth." James sighed and laid his palms out flat and open in front of him in an expression of resignation. "Luna," he started, still staring at his hands, "I don't remember who I used to be."

Luna eyes showed sympathy and she cautiously touched his arm to let him know she was there for him. "That's understandable. You've been through so much, it's only-"

He shook his head, realizing she had misunderstood him.

"No, Luna," he interrupted. At that moment in time, James felt very small and alone as he gazed up at the living mural that was the sky and he wondered if there was anyone out there who had ever been in the same predicament as he. It also didn't help him at all that he still felt that Screaming Banshee wreaking havoc with his senses, playing with his center of balance and giving him a headache. "I mean I don't remember anything at all. I don't remember who I *am*." He gestured feebly as he continued, "As far as I know, I'm James Evans, not this famous bloke *Harry Potter*. I..."

He looked to her for support and felt a minor tinge of pain when he saw she looked slightly suspicious.

"You mean you don't remember anything at all?" she asked bluntly, her eyes narrowing slightly.

James shrugged helplessly and then he drew back from her as she suddenly huffed and crossed her arms over her chest, turning her head the other way.

"Luna?" he said, reaching for her arm but thinking better of it. "What's wrong?"

After a short moment of hesitation, she responded, "Of all the people I know, I never thought that *you'd* end up just like everyone else."

*Just like everyone else...? What is she talking about?*

"I thought you were different from all the rest," she went on, "but I was wrong." Her words sounded bitter and a little more than resentful.

James felt his head swirling. What was she going on about? "Luna, I-"

"*Stop it, Harry!*" she shouted, turning on him and he finally saw that she was crying. Luna shakily brushed a stray tear from her cheek. "Everyone else makes fun of me – they steal things from me, they make fun of how I look, they ridicule my father's paper... and now *you're* doing it, too, trying to convince me that you don't know who you are-"

"LUNA!" he yelled desperately, cutting her off. "I'm *not* lying to you!"

She sniffed once but she didn't say anything. James took that as a cue to keep talking.

"I am *not* making fun of you – I wasn't lying when I said I don't know who I am. I don't know how to do magic and I didn't even know who *you* were until tonight." He spoke evenly, softly, not wanting to scare her off or upset her more. "Luna, the reason I'm here is because you told me we're *friends*. And I'll tell you something," his voice became slightly louder, "I do not lie to my friends."

James peered at her carefully, trying to tell what she was thinking, but her face was unreadable. After a long while, she took a deep breath and looked him in the eye.

"So you really can't remember?"

"Not a thing," he whispered solemnly.

"Okay," she answered quietly, nodding her head slowly. Luna rose to her feet. "Follow me, I have something else to show you then."

They crossed the empty field without saying a word to each other. Their path eventually brought them to the edge of a forest and they disappeared into the trees. He kept catching fleeting glances of what looked like glowing fairies dancing in and out of his peripheral vision. James eventually gave up trying to get a decent look at them and focused solely on following Luna, who was marching forward, winding

in and out of the trees and the undergrowth with ease compared to how clumsily he was trouncing about, constantly being tripped up and slowed down by low lying branches.

At last she came to a stop in a tiny clearing where a silver cauldron rested on top of a stone pedestal. An ethereal light shone down from above, illuminating it, and James saw there was glowing writing engraved along the sides, but it was in a language he could not understand.

“This is a pensieve,” she explained patiently, pointing at the shining vat. “It holds memories... and because you can't seem to recall your own, I'm going to share some of mine with you.” Luna extended a hand to him and pulled him forward. “Come closer, there – that's good.”

James gasped as he looked inside and saw silvery wisps spinning along the inside, lit up by some magical internal light.

“Now be sure to hold on to my hand tightly... good.” She regarded him seriously and he felt his pulse quicken as their eyes met. “This is going to feel a little... odd.”

Then for the second time that night, James felt the earth slip away from under his feet and he was tumbling into oblivion once more. This time, however, the disorientation didn't last nearly as long. Instead of finding himself in a foyer, James saw that he was standing in the compartment of a moving train. Looking around, he saw there was one more person in the room with him-

“Luna!” he exclaimed, surprised at seeing her sitting on the seat so calmly, reading what appeared to be an upside down magazine. She didn't move or acknowledge in any way that she had heard him. James raised a brow and waved a hand in front of her face. She didn't blink.

“She can't hear you,” he suddenly heard Luna's voice right by his ear. He twisted around and nearly fell over when he saw Luna standing right behind him.

"But- but you're-" he stammered, pointing wildly back and forth Luna and Luna.

"Harry, *relax*," she said as she smiled. "As I explained, we're in a memory right now."

James observed the memory-Luna closely as she flipped a page in her magazine, completely oblivious to the two extra occupants in the compartment. "Just which memory is this, exactly?"

Luna's smile became even broader.

"Why, it's the first time I ever met *you*."

And then the compartment door slid open and three people casually stepped in, passing right on through James and Luna as if they didn't exist. There was a tall, slightly awkward-looking boy followed by a noticeably younger version of himself, and backstopping the group was a shorter girl with long, straight red hair... Something inside him stirred at the sight of her and he struggled to think of who she was. Beside him, Luna poked his shoulder and whispered, "That's Ginny."

"Hi, Luna," the red-head said. "Is it okay if we take these seats?"

James turned to regard the memory-Luna, who looked up at the sound of her voice and nodded.

"Thanks." Ginny smiled at her and began moving her trunk up into the overhead luggage rack. James couldn't take his eyes off of her. The way she moved, the way her hair flowed so elegantly down her shoulders...

"...and *you're* Harry Potter."

At the sound of Luna's voice, he jumped a little and shifted his eyes back to the scene unfolding before them.

"I know I am," answered the memory-James.

The lanky boy chuckled and then the scene before him became fuzzy and distorted, as if he was watching events happen through an

unadjusted camera lens. Their voices faded away, becoming lower and lower in volume until James couldn't determine what they were saying any longer. He looked at Luna in alarm and she just shook her head calmly. "I'm calling up a new memory. Don't worry."

Within moments the train compartment was gone and they were standing in the stone hallway of what looked like a castle. Dozens of portraits hung from the walls and James saw that in all of them the pictures were *moving*. The younger memory-Luna walked into sight, carrying a stack of papers. Upon closer inspection, he saw that they were lists of missing books and other belongings.

Then from around the corner came... himself.

"Hello," said the younger Luna.

"How come you're not at the feast?" he heard himself ask.

"Well, I've lost most of my possessions. People take them and hide them, you know..."

While she spoke, James noticed his memory-self begin to frown and his brows came together in concern. He felt Luna lean close to him again and whisper, "This is the first time I realized that you actually cared about what happened to me."

James' eyes flicked over to where she was standing, serenely watching the memory unfold. She smiled at him then, but it was a sad, apologetic smile. "I'm sorry for overreacting earlier tonight. I'd like to think I've become a bit better with people over the last few years, but sometimes..."

He smiled at her reassuringly, patting her on the back.

"It's okay, don't worry about it."

"Thanks," she said. Luna closed her eyes and the memory shifted again. This time he spotted Luna immediately. She was sitting up on a stone wall along the edge of a courtyard, reading another upside down magazine. For a few long moments, nothing happened. Fluffy snowflakes drifted down slowly from the sky and he saw teenagers all

wearing sharp uniforms milling about the courtyard, some taking the time to catch snow on their tongues or fall back and make angels.

"This is Hogwarts," he heard the real Luna explain. "The wizard school we all went to."

James was still watching the memory-Luna when he heard laughter from off to the side. Turning quickly to see the commotion, he wasn't surprised to himself again, except this time he was flanked by a tall, lanky red-headed boy and a smiling, bushy-haired girl. All three of them had their arms wrapped around each other's shoulders as they strode through the courtyard.

"Did you see the look on Malfoy's face?" the taller boy blurted out, barely able to suppress his chuckling.

"Ron," the girl said, mock seriously, reaching around with her free arm and giving him a playful punch on the shoulder.

"Hermione!" he responded indignantly, still grinning. "What's that on your face?"

"What's *what* on my face?" she asked.

"*That!*" he exclaimed as he picked up a handful of snow and tossed it at her, missing by a few inches.

"Hey!" her cheeks were flushed and her eyes were glaring at him but a broad smile was spreading out across her face. She quickly retaliated, picking up a handful of snow and successfully mashing it into Ron's hair.

James saw himself pull his arms from around the two and step in between them.

"Now, now, you two, you better settle it down before-"

He didn't get a chance to finish his sentence because both Hermione and Ron had both chosen that same moment to chuck snowballs at him, which he managed to dodge just barely in time. The younger James dropped down into a crouch and his lips curled up into a smirk.



“That's it, you're both *done*.”

James watched in amazement as a snowball fight of epic proportions erupted between them. Eventually, other students entered the fray and the scene dissolved into a cloud of white before coming back into focus. This time they were in a rather normal-looking bedroom. He noticed there were two extra mattresses laid out across the floor, and judging by the various tote bags and general clutter of makeup materials scattered about on the dressers and the floor, he was in a bedroom being shared by three girls.

“This is the Burrow,” Luna said. “I was invited here the summer before my sixth year at school...”

Suddenly three girls walked into the room. James recognized them all – Luna, Hermione, and Ginny. Luna and Hermione stood on either side of Ginny, who was keeping her lips pressed together tightly in a failing attempt to keep from smiling.

“Ginny,” Hermione said slyly, giving the younger girl a knowing wink. “Come on... you can tell us.”

She shook her head, a playful smile tugging at the corners of her lips.

The memory-Luna folded her arms across her chest.

“I know who it is,” she stated conversationally. Hermione's and Ginny's eyes went wide at this new proclamation. “But I won't say anything unless it's okay with you, Ginny.”

They all looked anxiously at her as she bit her lip. Then she nodded at the other girl. Luna drew out the suspense only a heartbeat longer before she grinned and said, “It's Harry Potter.”

Hermione squealed and enveloped Ginny in a great bear hug.

“Oh, I always *knew* you two would get together!”

Luna poked James in the side.

“She's talking about *you*,” she supplied, giving him a wink.

"I- me..." he stuttered, staring at the dazzling red head dancing around in front of him. "Her?" he finished weakly.

Luna nodded. She pursed her lips and looked up, trying to recall something.

"I think we have time for one more memory."

The bedroom was gradually replaced by a kitchen full of quiet, somber-looking people. Standing in the middle he instantly noticed himself, wearing a grim expression on his face but exuding a quiet sense of inner strength he didn't know he possessed. On either side of him were Hermione and Ron, who he observed were holding hands as they stood before the crowd, lending support to their friend. While many of the faces were unfamiliar to him, James saw others he knew in the assembled group of people: Luna, Ginny, that tall awkward boy, and others whose faces he recognized from the massive snowball fight at Hogwarts.

"We're at the Burrow again, Harry," murmured Luna. "This happened after Bill and Fleur's wedding... when you left to go find the Horcruxes..."

His memory self cleared his throat. While from the front he appeared determined and completely confident in himself, James saw behind his back his hands were fidgeting nervously.

"First, I want to congratulate Bill and Fleur one more time..."

Amidst polite applause, James tilted his head towards Luna.

"Where did we go to?"

"To bring the fight to Voldemort," she said in hushed tones, giving him a grave look. In the background, James heard himself droning on about magic and evil but all of his attention was focused on Luna now. "You, Ron, and Hermione found him, Harry. The three of you ended the war."

"I..."

Luna gently placed a hand over his shoulder.

"You don't have to say anything. I think you've seen enough for now."

James felt the world shifting again, yet no new scene began to fade into sight before him. Rather, his view of the kitchen became smaller and smaller, as if he was being pulled away from it at an incredible speed. The scene eventually vanished and in its place was nothingness. James frowned. Darkness? What was this...?

"Harry, you have to pull your head out of the pensieve," he heard Luna say playfully.

He leaned back, blinking in the sudden light and gave her a sheepish smile.

"Let's go somewhere else, there really aren't too many good places to sit around here and talk."

As he followed her on the way back out of the forest, he thought back upon what he had seen in the pensieve. Most noticeably he'd seen himself, but he'd also seen his friends. Ron and Hermione, and his girlfriend, Ginny.

*I have friends! What will they say to me when we meet? I wonder when the last time I saw them was...?*

"Luna," he said, smiling dreamily to himself as he thought of his friends, "do you know where Ginny is?"

She froze in her footsteps, not bothering to turn around and face him.

"Or Ron or Hermione, for that matter," he amended quickly, scratching the back of his neck. "I think it would help me remember better if I could see them, too. What do you think?"

Luna slowly turned around. There was an indescribable, unreadable look on her face and James felt uneasy staring at her so he averted his gaze to the ground.

“Er, I mean, I'm not saying it's not enjoyable to be spending time with you, of course-”

“Harry,” her voice sounded hoarse and pained and she had closed her eyes. She shook her head back and forth as she stepped closer to him. Luna reached a hand out and held his. “I hate being the one to tell you this, but they're... they're *dead*.”

## Obliviate – Chapter Six

He felt reality fold in upon itself around him and for the third (and what James fervently hoped would be the last) time that night, the ground dropped out from beneath him again. Unlike the last two times, when James regained his senses, he was staring up at the sky and into Luna's concerned face. Dimly he realized that he was lying on his back – he must have fallen over. He sat up weakly but an oppressive sensation of vertigo made his head swim and he leaned back down on the pleasantly stationary grass.

“Harry, you should try and stay still,” suggested Luna. She was frowning and her eyes looked down at him with worry and sympathy. A sigh escaped her lips and she gave his shoulder a reassuring squeeze. “I... I shouldn't have told you so soon.”

He closed his eyes and his mouth curled into a grimace of pain brought about by the nauseating dizziness he was feeling at the moment and also by the feeling of emptiness and suffering he felt in his heart. He wished he could blame it all on the Screaming Banshee he'd had, but unfortunately for him, things weren't so simple. It was as if he was finally waking up from an impossibly long dream and someone was turning the lights on in his head, one by one; each flip of a switch illuminated the dusty, nearly forgotten memories in his mind and he remembered...

“They were killed by Voldemort,” he stated tonelessly. Even without opening his eyes he could tell that Luna was regarding him with a surprised expression. “Weren't they?”

“Y-you remember now...?”

He started to shake his head, felt a wave of nausea sweep over his stomach, and thought better of it.

“Not all of it,” he replied truthfully, staring beyond Luna's face and up at the sky. “Just bits and pieces...”

Indeed, he was finally able to recall the faces of his friends... He remembered the love he used to receive from the Weasleys, a love he'd never received from the despicable Dursleys, who were the only

survivors of his shattered family. Then he remembered meeting his godfather, Sirius... He remembered saving Hermione from the troll in his first year at Hogwarts – oh, Hogwarts! Fleeting phantom memories of feasts long ago danced across his tongue and he could almost see the faces of his dorm mates as if they were standing before him – Seamus, Dean, and Neville... poor Neville, who had bravely followed him to the Ministry of Magic and endured the Cruciatus for them all... and there was Luna, too – eccentric, Loony Luna Lovegood – but what he remembered about her best was her fierce loyalty and the simple love with which she embraced every single day of her life.

And standing tall behind his friends were the professors who had been such an important part of his time at Hogwarts: Hagrid, McGonagall, and Dumbledore. He could hear Hagrid's booming laugh and he smiled at the memory of Grawp, his half brother, reaching towards Hermione calling out, "Hermy!" Then a chill ran through his body and the hair stood up on the back of his neck as he vividly recalled the challenges and the horrible tragedy he'd witnessed at the end Triwizard Tournament...

Suddenly there were images, sensations, and emotions sailing throughout his mind, all of them focusing on the spirited, red-headed girl Ginny. The sheer exhilaration and the feeling of *love*, which had been so new and fresh and exciting and breathtakingly gorgeous and so addictive all at once...

"So what do you remember then?" queried Luna, interrupting his reverie.

"I..."

The sights and sounds and smells of Diagon Alley, his first visit to Hogsmeade, riding on a broom stick for the very first time – Bernie Botts' Every Flavor Jelly Beans, Chocolate Frogs, chasing after the Golden Snitch – Dumbledore's Army, Cho Chang, the Marauder's Map...

Things were coming back to him quickly and in no specific order, but one memory stood out beyond the rest. Rather, it wasn't really a

memory or a feeling he was recalling, but instead it was something else, like an unquestioned fact from his past life.

He blinked once and pulled his gaze away from the twinkling stars to look at Luna.

"I remember," he said in a whisper. Then his voice became louder and more forceful, "I remember who I am now. I really *am* Harry Potter, aren't I?" He sighed once, feeling as if an overwhelmingly heavy weight was pressing down on his chest. "And they're really gone..." he finished quietly.

There was a strange gleam in Luna's eyes - perhaps it was from light reflected off the millions of stars hanging above them or maybe it was from unshed tears, but he felt *something* emanating from her...

She opened her mouth as if to say something, but Harry suddenly pushed himself into an upright position. Not feeling disoriented at all, he boldly rose to his feet and looked back down at Luna, who was still sitting on the ground.

"I have to go," he declared, keeping his jaw firmly set in place and stoically refusing to allow the sudden anxiety and apprehension he felt show on face. "Now."

Luna silently nodded once and stood up, beckoning for him to follow her. Several moments later, they Apparated into the living room of Harry's flat.

"Thanks, Luna," he said softly, taking care to not make eye contact with her since he noticed that she still had that inscrutable look in her eyes. "Good night."

She stood still for a moment, unmoving, and Harry thought for an instant that she wasn't going to leave. Then-

"Good night, Harry," she murmured.

Luna raised her wand and then Disapparated with a sharp crack. Harry was left standing in the middle of the room with his head slightly bowed as he mulled over all that he had learned that night.

Although his mind was full of old memories bouncing about, they still had yet to fall into place and the constantly shifting images were giving him a pounding headache. He miserably rubbed his temples as he made his way into the kitchen and helped himself to a glass of water.

*I remember so much – my friends, my family. My life. But there's something missing, something's not quite right....*

In one gulp, he finished his glass of water and threw it into the sink in frustration, where it cracked and shattered into dozens of wet shards of glass.

*How did I end up here?*

The question nagged at him, burning a hole in his brain, and feeding his exhaustion. Unable to help himself, he yawned and glanced at the clock on the wall which told him it was four o'clock in the morning. While it was important to know how his life as a Muggle had started, it was equally important to get a good night's rest so he could reflect upon things with a sharper mind in the morning. He wearily wandered over to his bedroom and collapsed atop his bed, letting his fatigue wash over him and pull him into the realm of dreams...

Back at her house, Luna decided to leave the never ending nightscape of her room and venture around for a bit. While her room had always been the same ever since she could remember, the rest of the house had not. Only in recent years had The Quibbler become popular enough for her father to be able to afford permanent magical expansions, and Luna hadn't explored the house to its fullest extent yet.

It was ironic in a way, because she'd seen so many things and explored so much of the world except her own home.

When the war ended in her seventh year at Hogwarts, she'd politely refused taking a job working with her father and decided to really *live* her life and journey outside of Britain. For two years she'd explored the magical community, traveling to the nearby countries of France and Germany and then to places as far away as New Zealand and Brazil. Her travels had even included a visit to Atlantis – although the



Muggles believed the city to be a mere myth, the metropolis was still very much alive and well, having been hidden centuries ago beneath hundreds of kilometers of ocean water. All in all, it was an easy trip for a wizard to take, especially if one had a Portkey handy.

Luna held her breath as she crept silently down a long, wooden hallway – she didn't want to disturb any of the portraits. Some of the new ones her father had bought were quite strange and prone to pulling unfortunate passersby into lengthy and uncomfortable conversations.

Her worldly journey had succeeded admirably in opening up her eyes not only to the dozens of intriguing foreign cultures she'd immersed herself in, but it had also given her a newfound awareness of *herself*. One thing that every single place had in common was the presence of *people*, and as she (quite modestly) admitted to her father, her two years spent wandering the world had given her a better idea of how to interact with everyone else.

She stopped in front of a mirror on the wall to fix her hair and she noticed she was wearing a small frown.

“What's the matter, dear?” asked the mirror in a matronly voice.

“Nothing,” she lied easily before walking past the enchanted decoration in search of less conversational furniture.

Luna knew what was wrong, however. It was Harry. She just felt *bad* that she'd been the one to break the bad news to him about his friends. Luna was so *proud* of how well she could deal with people now, but she had fallen flat on her face when dealing with Harry. The only thing she'd managed to do in the short time she'd spent with him so far was to make him feel... well, *horrible*. She could only imagine what he must be feeling now... He had always been so close to Ginny and Hermione and Ron...

“Hey, what about me?” she muttered to herself, joking half-heartedly. Certainly she'd been a friend of Harry's as well, but she hadn't ever been as close to him as the others had been... which brought her to her second problem:

She had a crush on Harry. And it wasn't going away anytime soon.

Like many girls of the same age growing up in the wizarding world, she'd had an innocent, idealistic crush on the legendary Boy-Who-Lived in her early teens, which had grown into something more mature as she became older. When she finally met him, her attraction for him had become something tangible and realistic, and interestingly enough, he didn't seem any less ideal than she'd ever imagined, so she kept waiting, hoping, wishing, dreaming...

But then Ginny Weasley had walked into the picture and her aspirations were thrown out the window. Luna had done the only thing she could do: she'd just settled back and watched the epic, theatrical romance unfold between the two of them. Who was she to barge in and take that romance away from either one of her friends? It would have been selfish and wrong – so she'd never said anything. Over the last two years she spent at Hogwarts, she'd watched with equal parts joy and sorrow as Harry and Ginny became closer with every passing day.

Then one morning the word was out that Ginny had been kidnapped by Death Eaters while Harry was off hunting Horcruxes. Yet before the true horror of that news could really sink in, headlines in the papers the following day were all screaming, “Lord Voldemort is dead! The war is over!”

It was a bittersweet victory, however. Details were so few and far between to the point of being nonexistent but all of the newspapers agreed – Hermione Granger, Ronald Weasley, and Ginny Weasley were all dead. Murdered by Voldemort in one last parting shot at Harry. She remembered the media had had an absolute field day with the multiple tragedies all occurring simultaneously.

In the midst of all the celebration, everyone wanted to know, “Where is Harry Potter?” He had never been declared dead by the Ministry and when asked about his whereabouts, Albus Dumbledore only ever gave the cryptic reply of, “He is somewhere safe.” Personally, Luna had always wondered where Harry could have been hiding, but she'd *never* thought to consider that he'd been sent into exile, to live as a Muggle. It was the perfect hiding spot... but had he been sent here

willingly? She resolved to get to the bottom of that mystery. However, in the meantime, there were more pressing matters at hand for her to deal with...

Two years later, the enigmatic Harry Potter had entered her life once again. He was distraught and vulnerable and so, so available... Luna felt guilty for thinking of him that way, but her feelings had always been there, lying just beneath the surface, refused, suppressed and hidden for so long... And now that he was here and within arms' reach, could she trust herself enough to hold back and simply remain nothing more than his loyal friend? Could she restrain herself enough to stay at his side and offer him sympathy and a supportive shoulder to cry on?

Did she have the willpower to continue denying herself what she'd always wanted?

She twirled a strand of her hair around her finger and bit her lip. No matter what course of action she decided to take, things were about to become *very* interesting...

"James?"

Someone was calling out to him. The voice was very faint, as if it was coming through to him from a great distance and there was a soft, insistent tapping sound echoing around his head as well. Both noises were steadily growing louder in volume...

"JAMES!"

With a jolt, his eyes snapped open and he jumped up, only to feel himself falling through the air and colliding with a stubborn, stiff surface... A moment later, his sleepy mind put together the pieces and realized that he'd fallen out of bed. And what was that sound...?

"JAMES! I know you're in there!"

Whose voice was that? It sounded *awfully* familiar... With a grimace, he stumbled to his feet and staggered towards the door. Even if it killed him, he was going to find out who was so anxious to see him. However, his effort to make it to the door was met with unexpected

resistance - his head felt like it wanted to be on the floor and his legs felt like they desperately wanted to go in opposite directions. Oh, that was right, he'd been drinking last night. Of course, a hangover. A stupid, bloody *hangover*.

Then before he could stop himself, he saw the ground sailing up at his face again and he managed to let out a surprised, "Oh!" before he toppled over and did a face plant onto the carpet. He rolled over and he noticed from his position on the ground he had an excellent view of the ceiling, which appeared to be spinning in gleeful circles above his head. *Damn it*, what had been in that Screaming Banshee last night?

"J-just a minute!" he called out.

Somehow he was able to concentrate enough to regain his center of balance, put on a new shirt, and scramble over to the door, where he hoped his visitor would still be waiting. When he reached his front door, he fumbled with the lock for a second and then swung the door wide open-

"James," Nora said brightly, smiling at him.

"...Nora?" he asked, blinking groggily at the bright sunlight rudely invading the privacy of his home.

"It's me," she added helpfully.

"NORA?" he repeated, blinking again, really seeing her for the first time.

She nodded, her eyes never leaving his.

"How did-"

"Church directory," she responded quickly, her voice raising in pitch slightly. Harry *did* remember filling out an information card... Nora gulped and her eyes darted around nervously, not daring to meet his. "I- well, I just wanted to see you, and..."

"I thought you didn't want to see me," he answered quietly, not moving from the doorway. "And you told me not to come to your church anymore," he stated flatly, searching her face for any indication of what she could be thinking.

"James," she breathed, her eyes pleading with him. "*Please*, may I come in?"

He regarded her coolly for a moment. Standing here at his front door desperate to see him was Nora O'Connor, the sweet and beautiful creature who had been so instrumental in nursing him back to health and whose warm care and tenderness had made him smile so many times... yet he still felt a little burned by the fact that she had shot him down so quickly when he had met her before. But life had a funny way of playing out sometimes and now here he was, with the power to exact revenge upon her by turning his back on her.

His hand tightened on the doorknob and he hesitated. The door wavered slightly in his grip.

What was he thinking? This is what he wanted, wasn't it? Therefore he should extend every courtesy he could to his dear Nora.

A few moments ticked by and then he finally nodded.

"Sure," he said easily, hiding his excitement by pretending to yawn. "You can help yourself to anything in the kitchen, but if you'll excuse me, I need a quick shower..."

Her face lit up and he hurried away as she stepped inside. The last thing he saw of her before he retreated into the privacy of his bedroom was her dazzling smile and those smoldering eyes...

Just what had he gotten himself into?

## Obliviate – Chapter Seven

She was waiting for him in the kitchen, sitting at the end of the table. Her back was facing him as he approached but he could see that her head was down and her hands were clasped together in her lap. He didn't want to startle her so he cleared his throat and loudly entered the room. Nora jumped in her seat, surprised by his sudden appearance but she managed to give him a nervous smile before she ripped her gaze away from his eyes.

Harry leaned against the wall, casually folding his arms across his chest. He returned the smile. "Hi."

She took a deep breath and then a wry grin spread across her lips.

"I suppose you're wondering why I've shown up at your house unannounced and uninvited," she remarked. Harry inclined his head ever so slightly and waited for her to continue. "I- you," she paused, closing her eyes momentarily to pull herself together. In a quiet voice she said, "I've missed you."

The lingering effects of the hangover coupled with the adventure he'd gone on last night with Luna in discovering his past had put him on edge. *This* pushed him over that edge and he felt a foul mood beginning to take charge.

"You?" he said softly, shaking his head incredulously. "You came here to play games with me? Is that what you wanted to do?" He snorted once, not caring if it made him look bad in front of her. He was done with her. "I'll come out and say it," he continued, gesturing as he spoke. "Yeah, I liked you. But that's over now."

She took his blows quite patiently and when she replied, her voice was calm and steady, "I made a mistake."

He closed his mouth and stared at her for a heartbeat. Why was she having this effect on him? They had never even dated once yet here they were, arguing like an old married couple desperately trying to work out their irreconcilable differences. He half expected her to pull the divorce sheets out of her handbag at any moment and ask for his signature.

Her eyes bored into his. Those sweet, hazel eyes, so expressive - so full of warmth and care and compassion. He felt his pulse quicken and his breath caught in his throat. Merlin.

“Can you forgive me?” she asked.

Harry opened his mouth to say yes – yes, he forgave her; yes, he would absolutely *love* to work things out; yes, he would love to give it another go (had there even been a first one?); and yes, he would love to touch her hand again, hold her in his arms, and be so much more... However, the only noise that came out of his throat was a strangled sounding gasp.

She stood up and began to slowly walk over to him. He felt sweat starting to drip down his neck as she drew nearer and he tugged at his collar, trying to cool himself off. Nora immediately stiffened in place and gave him an odd look. They were standing about two feet apart and he could see every detail, every exquisite feature of her and he could smell her perfume.

Suddenly she closed the gap between them and reached for him – he closed his eyes and held his breath, but the embrace never came. Cautiously, slowly, he opened one eye and then the other to see she held his necklace in her hand. *Her* necklace.

Her amber gaze came to rest on him.

“This is mine,” she murmured, squeezing the silver cross she held in her hand.

“I know,” Harry replied steadily, looking into her eyes. “You gave it to me, remember?”

“Have you-” Nora stopped herself and pressed her lips together, taking a second to glance at the necklace one more time. “Have you been wearing this ever since...?”

“Yes.”

Silence. And then, “But why?”

He thought about it. Why had he kept it on all this time? Certainly he should have removed it, or even thrown it away after she'd turned him down so curtly at her church that one day, but he hadn't. Harry shrugged.

"Because it made me feel comfortable, I guess." He tilted his head to look at the necklace she was still holding onto. "Er, do you want it back?"

Nora blinked and then she hastily dropped it, firmly shaking her head. "Oh, no – I was just... I saw it and I was curious..."

He looked at her for a moment longer and then he shook his head as well. It wouldn't be right to go forward with her any longer. While the memories were old and barely half-remembered, the pain was still fresh and a part of him grieved for his friends. Now would be an inappropriate time to start a relationship – to selfishly indulge himself when he should be properly mourning Ginny, Hermione, and Ron.

"I'm sorry," he muttered, suddenly feeling guilty as he remembered his past. "I... I learned something last night. And I can't do this with you."

Harry quickly made as if he was going to take off the chain but she reached out and grabbed his wrist, stopping him.

"Why not?" she breathed.

"Because," he said feeling a tinge of sadness for a lost chance, a lost future with Nora. "I'm not... I'm not who you think I am."

The faintest flicker of a smile appeared on her face.

"I know," she pressed on, "but why should that stop us?"

Her words hung between the two, suspended in the air and in the silence. Harry felt his heart racing and his palms were suddenly sweaty.

"Come on, James," she said with a smile, cutting through the quiet and making his breath catch in his throat.



Harry turned his head away from her. "I..."

He contemplated what his possible future with Nora could be like, but he wasn't able to get very far before his thoughts wandered off to his past life again. It wouldn't be *honest* to just forget Ginny so soon and move on, would it? What would Ron think? Or Hermione? Or anyone else, for that matter? No, he couldn't do this. It wasn't fair to them, to their memories – and he needed more time to come to terms with the vast emptiness their deaths had left in his life.

However before he could convince himself of a way to gallantly extract himself from his current situation, his doubts were shattered as she quickly leaned in and landed a delicate kiss right on his lips.

It was short, it was chaste – but it was light and sweet and it was full of promise and desire, and that was all he wanted. Nora stared at him silently, her eyes unblinking and not moving away from his. She was standing so close to him and he had a difficult time trying not to get distracted as he felt the warmth coming from her body.

"Let's get out of here," she suggested. Her eyes sparkled and her soft lips smiled at him. "We can talk over lunch."

"Someone's coming," briskly announced Mercuria Mercury as she entered her frame.

Dumbledore looked up at the portrait of the former headmistress and pushed his spectacles back up the bridge of his nose. She had a habit of lurking around in other portraits along the corridor below and thus she was usually able to give him warning before people arrived at his office.

"Minerva?" he asked.

Mercury merely smiled and said, "She's coming up the stairs now."

A moment later the sound of knocking echoed throughout his office and the door swung open to admit his visitor. The deputy headmistress of Hogwarts strode in, her posture straight and business like, her expression guarded.

“Albus,” she said sharply with a curt nod of her head.

“Minerva,” he greeted her with his famous grandfatherly smile and charm. However, it was all an act – he knew why she had come and he was nervous as hell beneath the façade of calmness and cleverness he wore for everyone else. He fought back his nerves and kept his breathing even and his stance relaxed. “A pleasure, as always.”

She gave him a cold stare. Then with her lips pressed together into a thin line, she reached into her robes and pulled out the latest edition of the Daily Prophet. Minerva didn't even bother to unfold it, she just held it in her hands and let her fingers idly tap against the crisp newspaper.

“I presume you've read the first page.” She arched an eyebrow at him. When he didn't reply and instead sighed tiredly, she knew the answer before he even opened his mouth.

“Yes.”

“Then you must know that we have to do something,” she returned quickly. A minute frown overcame her face and her voice took on an edge of urgency. “Surely you've already thought of this.”

Again he replied with only one word. “Yes.”

She realized she was still drumming her fingertips on the newspaper and stopped. Minerva regarded him with a full frown and put a hand on her hip. “Is that all you're going to say? Yes? Yes?” The twinkle in Dumbledore's eyes dimmed but he remained silent. She decided to try a different tact to get through to the headmaster. Quietly and with a touch of concern she said, “Albus, he might not be safe out there.”

Finally, after a few moments of silence and after he'd determined she had nothing further to say, he nodded.

“Please trust me, Minerva,” he said. His words came out sounding gentle and sincere, but there was a firmness behind them that discouraged any arguing in return. “I've already taken the matter into consideration. I'm doing everything I can.”

Minerva's gaze softened and she pursed her lips and nodded slowly.

"Do you think he'll be all right out there?"

"As long as he remains oblivious," he replied softly, turning away to look out the window across the grounds of Hogwarts. "As long as he stays blissfully unaware of all that has transpired in the past, I see no reason why we should interfere."

She took a hesitant step forward until she was standing closer to him.

"And if he remembers?" she inquired, not really wanting to know what would happen.

His piercing cobalt gaze swept around and came to rest on her and she felt a frigid shiver trickle down her spine.

"If he does," Dumbledore answered, "then I will see to it personally that he is taken care of."

Even though Nora had succeeded in breaking through the barrier of ice by kissing him, Harry still couldn't help but feel incredibly awkward in her presence. They had finally agreed on a restaurant, been seated moments ago, and Harry was silently cursing his decision to be dragged along on this little adventure. Now they were sitting on opposite sides of the table facing one another and the only thing he could do was stare at her because their server had forgotten to bring them their menus.

Nora rested her chin in the palm of her hand and gave Harry a cheerful smile.

"You should try and relax," she suggested. He frowned at her but then he noticed that she was right. His back and shoulders were feeling tense and stiff and were pressed straight up against the back of the chair. "There you go," she said as he visibly sagged down in his seat.

"Thanks," he mumbled before turning to notice that their waiter had arrived with the menus. "Thanks," he repeated again and he

immediately began to pore over the different choices, grateful for an excuse to break eye contact with Nora.

The entire time they'd spent together she'd so far tried to get him to relax, to smile, or to joke around with her. But despite her good intentions and her pleasant demeanor, Harry still felt like he was treading on forbidden ground. Yes, he liked her, and yes, she liked him – that much was obvious. Yet for him, things weren't as simple as he would have liked them to be. He was still mulling over the complexities of relationships with dead people when she reached across the table and held his hand. His eyes darted to her hand and then up to her face, to see she was staring at him. Again.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw their waiter walk up to them.

"Are you two ready to order?" He grinned stupidly as he saw they were holding hands. "Need more time?" Harry nodded and waved dismissively at him with his free arm. "Okay, I'll be back!"

Nora chuckled.

"Please, Nora," he begged quietly, not wanting to make a scene.

"Please what?" she asked playfully with an arch of her eyebrow.

"You know full well what I mean."

Nora's eyebrow lifted up even higher and she tilted her head slightly. Her voice took on a lower, husky tone and her lips curved up into a demure smile. "Do I? Do I *really*?" She leaned in closer across the table and said very softly, "The only thing I know is that I would like to get to know you better... and judging by how you reacted when I kissed you earlier, you seem to be thinking the same thing."

Harry goggled at her. He hadn't been expecting her to be so *direct* with him.

"I-"

"James," she interrupted, sounding nonchalant and disinterested once again, "we have a problem."

"A problem?" he echoed, feeling lost.

"Yes, a problem."

There was a pregnant pause in their conversation and Harry held his breath, waiting for her to continue. He licked his lips anxiously and timidly asked her, "And just what might that problem be?"

She leaned over the small table again and she was so close to him he could feel her breath on his face.

"We both want each other but neither of us is doing a damned thing about it."

And then in the middle of a reasonably crowded Muggle restaurant full of people, she grabbed onto his collar and kissed him for the second time that day. She came onto him quickly and hungrily, and she moaned softly when she realized he'd opened his lips and was kissing her back with all the same ferocity she was putting forth.

They split apart and fell back into their chairs, staring at each other. Harry had a dazed expression on his face and his mouth was still hanging open slightly as he absentmindedly straightened his collar and noticed that like him, she too was breathing heavily. Somehow in the few moments they had been kissing, Nora's hair had become mussed and a few strands hung freely in front of her face. That, coupled with the immensely satisfied grin she wore gave her an air of otherworldly sensuality.

Harry shifted uncomfortably in his seat, unsure of what he should say.

"Hello, how are you two today?" Their waiter had returned. "Did you find anything you liked?"

Harry and Nora reluctantly tore their eyes away from each other and looked at the waiter.

For a second, neither of them said anything. Then Nora chose to speak up:

"I'm terribly sorry," she said as she handed her menu back to the waiter, "but I think we'll be on our way out."

It was Harry's turn to raise an eyebrow at her, but he kept quiet and handed his menu back as he stood up with her. Nora understood his unasked question and whispered into his ear, "I found what I wanted this afternoon... but he wasn't on the menu."

His eyes went wide and she pecked him on the cheek. She reached for his hand and gave him a tug.

"Come on, James," she declared boldly. Her eyes sparkled mischievously. "I believe we were on our way out."

*Beep.*

*BEEP.*

*BEEP!*

"Um."

*BEEP BEEP!*

With a groan, he forced himself to sit up. He glanced around his surroundings, searching for the offending alarm clock and he extended a clumsy hand over to his side, knocking coins and his car keys off the nightstand. Harry growled when he couldn't find it and he opened a sleepy eye to look at the blurry world before him.

*BEEP BEEP BEEP!*

After what seemed like forever, his hands closed around the pesky digital clock and pressed the snooze button. With a sigh, he fell back onto the bed, his ears still ringing from the painful racket they had just endured, and he tried to remember what had happened last night.

After leaving the restaurant, he had returned to his flat with Nora and... and...

Oh. That was right.

And then... had they gone again after he'd cooked dinner...? Ah, yes, that's right, they had. So that would mean...

A slight frown crossed his lips as he reached over to the other side of the bed. Nora wasn't there. Now fully awake, he jumped out of bed and immediately tripped over his boxers, which were bunched around his ankles for some odd reason. Rubbing his elbow, he wondered to himself, "Merlin, what did we do last night?"

A cursory glance at the bed told him the other half was completely made up as if it had never been slept in. He paused before putting on some clothes, staring at the unused half of his bed. Was it possible? Had he simply *dreamed* the whole thing...?

His mind whirling, he hurried out of his bedroom and surveyed the kitchen, taking note that there were no dirty dishes lying out or half-burnt candles on the table. The kitchen looked frighteningly clean and he spun around to check the living room when something caught his eye. Hanging on his refrigerator was a small, pink square of paper. He moved closer to inspect it and he saw that Nora had written down her phone number and address.

"Ah," he muttered. A slow grin began to creep across his face. "Today," he said to himself, "is going to be an excellent day."

**A/N 9/18/06:**

Coming up in Chapter 8: Quidditch, more Luna, firewhisky, awkward situations in tight closet spaces, and more...

**A/N 9/28/06:**

And it's finally posted! Please read and review!

## Obliviate – Chapter Eight

“Someone looks a little too happy today.”

Harry wiped the sweat off his brow and smiled to himself as he heaved a box onto a skid. He looked up over the tower of packages at Sam.

“So what if I am?” he responded.

Sam held his hands up and raised his eyebrows. “Hey, no need to get defensive; I was just noticing you seem a little less grouchy today.”

He narrowed his eyes. “You calling me grouchy?”

The older man idly tapped his fingers along a box and then he nodded after a moment. “Yeah, just a little bit.”

Harry couldn't resist a chuckle. Ever since day one (at least from when he could remember working there at least), Sam had gone out of his way to make him feel welcome. While Sam was nearly ten years his elder, the two of them got along famously and the long work day seemed to pass by quickly when they were together. Usually he would insult Harry in some way and then they would both share a good laugh afterwards.

“So, are you gonna tell me who she was?”

“What?” Harry asked, caught off guard by the question.

“You know, your lady friend,” he said, folding his arms across his chest. “I'm an old man, James, I *know* these things.”

“You're twenty-nine, Sam,” Harry shot back. “That's not very old.”

His partner snorted indignantly and waggled his eyebrows. “I'm old enough to know a few things about life, that's all.” He paused for a moment and then a smirk appeared on his face. “I don't even get a name?”



Harry sighed and lifted another box onto the pile. "Her name's Nora," he said.

"Aha!" Sam cried out, raising a triumphant fist in the air. "But I'm afraid I have one more question to ask of you."

He rolled his eyes and turned to face his friend. "Yes?"

"This one's a little more serious than the last question I asked you, James. You sure you won't mind if I ask?"

Harry studied the older man's face. He appeared to be sincere so he nodded, curious to know what he was going to ask him.

"Was it a one night stand?"

He had opened his mouth to say something but he stopped himself, unsure of what his answer would be. Had their time together only been a single night of unrestrained lust? Had it truly been so shallow?

No. He clamped his jaw shut, recalling not just the passion but also the tenderness and the easy familiarity they had shared with one another that night. Slowly he shook his head.

"No, it wasn't a one night stand, Sam."

The other man appeared to perk up at the news. "What, is she your girlfriend or something?"

This time Harry smiled faintly, staring past Sam, thinking about how he felt about Nora.

"No," he said, feeling his cheeks flush slightly. "I think I've found someone much more permanent than a girlfriend."

The rest of the day passed by rather quickly – Nate announced to them at half two that they could leave early. So it was at about three o'clock that Harry found himself back at home, standing by his front door, fumbling around in his pockets for the key to his house.

"Dammit," he muttered to himself. "Why don't I keep this thing with my car keys..."

Suddenly there was a soft *click* from the door and it swung open with a quiet creak. Harry looked up, startled by the movement, and he did a double take. Standing in his doorway smiling serenely at him was Luna.

"Hello, Harry," she said amiably. She turned her head to the door and looked at it curiously. "You seemed to be having trouble unlocking this so I took the liberty of opening it for you."

"Luna?" he asked, feeling lightheaded by her unexpected appearance at his flat.

"*Hello*, Harry," she repeated. Luna gazed at him concernedly. "Are you feeling well? Maybe you should come inside and have a seat."

"Yes," he murmured weakly, fiddling with the keys in his hand that he no longer needed. "Perhaps I should."

"All right then." She spun around and walked down the hall to the kitchen. "I made some tea for us, Harry..."

Why did the women in his life enjoy showing up at his house uninvited? He shuffled down the hall in a daze and Luna smiled as he entered the kitchen and took a seat at the table. She carried over a tray and set it down in front of them. Humming to herself, she poured herself a cup and started sipping on it contentedly.

"Um," Harry mumbled.

Luna looked up over her cup at him. "What was that, Harry?"

He took a breath and ran a hand through his dark hair. "Luna, what are you doing here?"

"Why, I'm sitting here, having tea with you. I thought that was rather obvious," she added calmly, smiling at him again before taking another sip from her cup.

“Er, no – no, that's not what I meant,” he blurted out. “Uh, I meant...” Harry stared at her, feeling hopelessly lost in his own home. Finally he settled on asking her, “Why are you here, Luna?”

She delicately set her cup on the table and folded her hands together as she peered at him intently. “I felt like you needed some cheering up.” He smiled at her gratefully and he relaxed into his seat. “So,” she continued, “I made plans for us tonight and you can forget all about remembering that you forgot.”

“I – what?” he asked dumbly. “Plans? What plans?”

“Harry,” she said cheerily, “we're going to a Quidditch game tonight!”

It was an evening match, pitting (as Luna informed Harry) the absolutely *hopeless* Chudley Cannons versus the Falmouth Falcons, who were expected to win. When they arrived at Chudley, Luna happily informed Harry that the seats she had bought were perfectly placed towards the middle of the pitch and at average height, which would allow them an excellent view of the upcoming game. As they settled in, a crisp breeze swept over them as the sun retreated over the horizon, half hidden by a bank of clouds. Everywhere Harry looked, there were people of all ages decked out in either orange or dark gray, already cheering wildly even though the match had not yet begun.

Curious, he peered over the railing at the dizzying hundred foot drop and then he suddenly jumped back as seven fiery blurs zipped past his head.

From behind him he heard someone shout, “It's the Cannons!”

As the Cannons soared through the air, looping and performing barrel rolls to impress the crowd, Harry heard scattered cheers of, “Go Cannons!” and a child walking up the aisle next to him smiled and said, “Let's all just keep our fingers crossed and hope for the best, eh?”

He quickly turned his head as he heard boos and hisses coming from somewhere, and on the opposite side of the pitch from where they were sitting, the Falcons blasted off into the air, flying in tight

formation. To Harry, they all appeared very rough and rowdy; their Beaters had arms that looked as wide as his neck and even though there was a sharp chill in the air, they had torn off the sleeves of their robes to show off their massive biceps.

“Those two are supposed to be the best Beaters Falmouth's had since the Broadmoor brothers,” Luna explained, pointing to the two of them. Then she added dryly, “If you couldn't already tell, they've got a reputation for being a bit chippy.”

“Yes,” he murmured, studying the moves of the professional players with awe. They all moved so quickly and fluidly on their brooms – even though the Chudley Cannons were supposed to be the worst team in the league, he still thought they looked like a well-oiled machine, primed and ready to go.

The shrill cry of a magically amplified whistle rang throughout the stadium, interrupting his thoughts, and he saw the referee motioning for the team captains to land so they could do the traditional handshake.

“That's Galvin Gudgeon,” Luna said, nodding her head towards a thin wiry man standing alongside the rest of his orange-clad teammates. “He's the seeker for the Cannons,” she went on. Then, lowering her voice so people around her couldn't listen in, she added, “and if you ask me, he's the reason why Chudley's so hopeless right now. He actually fell off his broom chasing a butterfly once.”

“What?” Harry asked jokingly, “did he think it was the Snitch?”

“Yes,” Luna replied sincerely, staring at him unblinkingly.

Without warning, the Snitch was released and the opposing teams kicked off. Two professional announcer's voices echoed throughout the stands, offering play by play announcements and color commentary, but Harry barely heard a word because Luna kept up a constant commentary of her own, filling him in on little known facts about each player and discussing their strengths and weaknesses and such.

"It actually got so bad," she went on knowledgeably, "that Ragmar Dorkins, the team manager, had to publicly plead with the fans to not curse poor Galvin for playing so poorly."

Harry glanced away from the game to study Luna. "You sure know an awful lot about the Chudley Cannons."

Her eyes flickered for an instant to him and then back to the play. "Oh - an old friend of mine was a great Cannons fan," she said. "I became a Cannons fan because of... my friend."

Harry could have sworn he saw a pink tinge on her cheeks but he kept his lips shut and resumed watching the game.

After about forty-five minutes of lopsided play (Falmouth was leading Chudley ninety to zero), the cries and cheering suddenly grew in intensity and people rose out of their seats, shouting and calling out wildly. Harry decided to listen to the slick voice of the Chudley announcer and he paid attention just in time to hear, "GUDGEON SEES THE SNITCH! And Drevis Birch goes tearing down the wing - they're neck and neck-"

He watched, captivated by the two Seekers, and then a flash of gray caught his eye. Harry felt completely helpless as a Falmouth Beater lazily moved into position above the two Seekers, casually waiting for them to come into range so he could launch a Bludger at Galvin. Then, with a feral grin on his face, the Beater wound up and took a mighty swing at the iron ball, sending it hurdling towards the Seeker.

Without thinking, Harry jumped up and screamed, "GALVIN, LOOK OUT!"

However, Galvin suddenly seemed to lose balance on his broom and he nearly slipped off, righting himself just before he completely lost his grip - allowing the Bludger to sail harmlessly past him and collide instead with the Falmouth Seeker, who wasn't as fortunate and was knocked clean off his broom. Finally unhindered, Galvin zipped forward with one extra burst of speed and plucked the Golden Snitch from in front of him.

The stadium exploded with exuberant Cannons fans and great magical cannon lined up around the perimeter of the pitch started blasting magical fireworks in the air as the last Quidditch players descended. In the center of the field, a mob of enthusiastic Chudley fans ran over to the team and Harry saw them hoist Galvin up onto their shoulders and begin to carry him away. Over the deafening roar, he heard the announcer shouting, "I DON'T BELIEVE IT! GUDGEON HAS CAUGHT THE SNITCH! THE CANNONS WIN!" From over to his right, Luna leapt to her feet and she wrapped Harry up in a fierce hug.

"We did it! We did it!" she burst out as she released him, beaming merrily and clapping her hands together. "It's our first win of the season!"

"That's great!" he exclaimed, allowing himself to get swept up in the cheering and good feeling surrounding him.

"Harry, Harry," she called out excitedly, "We have to go *celebrate!*"

He leaned in closer so he could hear her over the thunderous din. "What did you have in mind?"

Her eyes lit up. "I know just the place," she said before winding an arm through his, whisking him away with a spin, leaving nothing behind except the distinct *crack* of Disapparation.

They Apparated moments later into a small, dimly lit room. Dozens of coats hung on racks and lined the walls. A single hovering candle was the sole provider of light in the sad little closet and the air was motionless and smelled like a mixture of all sorts of deodorants, perfumes, and colognes. Harry resisted the urge to cough since he was standing very close to Luna, for there wasn't very much space to move around. She twisted around, trying to disentangle herself from his arm and he could see she had a look of mild dismay on her face.

"Hmph," she muttered. "This was *supposed* to be the designated Apparition point." She swiveled her head from side to side, taking in her surroundings. "I guess it's a coat room now."

Harry grimaced. Luna was unwittingly pressing her body against him in a variety of ways due to the way she was moving around trying to get free; he could feel her body heat rolling off of her and onto him and he could smell the faint scent of her shampoo since he was almost an entire foot taller than her and his nose was nearly buried in her hair.

“Uhhh,” he stuttered, trying his best to back away from her. “Maybe you should look for the door, Luna.”

“Oh,” she muttered, and he could feel her hot breath on his neck as she looked up at him and said, “I think it's right behind you, if you could just-”

“Yeah, I'll turn around here-”

“Ow!”

“Oh, sorry, I didn't see-”

“Here, let me reach past you-”

“No, I can get it-”

“It's only a few more inches-”

“GOT IT!”

The door swung open, depositing them in a heap on the floor, with Luna lying on top of Harry, both of them momentarily stunned by the fall. They both stared at each other, at a loss for words. Luna opened her mouth to say something but ahead of them, a smiling, uncoordinated-looking boy stepped forward, extending a hand to them.

“Hullo there,” he said loudly. Then he added matter-of-factly, “The Apparition point's changed, just so you know.”

Luna graciously accepted his hand and he helped to lift her to her feet. Harry stiffly sat up (his back was sore from the fall) and stood up, wincing slightly as he straightened his shoulders out. He blinked once

and then he looked at the young man who had helped them. There was something he recognized about him...

"Stan?" he asked. "Stan Shunpike?"

The young man perked up. "Oh, you know my brother? Yes, he works on the Knight Bus, he does, I suppose everyone knows him..." Then he stood up taller and puffed his chest out. "I'm Daniel Shunpike. Stan's my older brother."

"It's nice to meet you," said Luna, nodding at him.

"So, er – if you don't mind me asking, what do you do here, Dan?"

He raised a brow. "Why, I help people like you to situate themselves after they fall out of the coat closet! 'Tis a very important job, yes!"

Harry stared at him. "You couldn't just expand that room and make it a little easier to get out of?"

"Good heavens, no! And ruin a perfectly good coat closet?" Dan snorted as he motioned for them to follow him through a doorway.

Harry cast an anxious sidelong glance at Luna, trying to study her expression, to see if she felt as awkward as he did, but she simply hummed to herself and followed Dan on down the short corridor. He shook his head, trying to cast off these strange new feelings.

*Think about Nora. Nora, Nora, Nora...*

"Let me take you to the main room. This," he said before he opened the door, "is the new and improved Three Broomsticks, it is."

With a grand flourish, he pushed the door open and bowed, waving them in. In stark contrast to the cramped, dark coat closet, the main room was a wide open, bright area. Their feet clicked on the old fashioned floorboards beneath them as they wound their way through the many tables and chairs further into the room. There were several other patrons in the store who casually glanced up at their entrance and Harry noticed house elves running around, carrying trays of food to the customers, polishing the tables, and sweeping the floors.



At the back of the room, there was a bar. He was pleased to note that it appeared significantly cleaner than the one at the Leaky Cauldron. Luna eased herself into a barstool and patted the one next to her.

“Come on,” she said conversationally, “don't be shy.”

A comely-looking older lady stepped behind the counter and her face lit up at the couple before her.

“Luna!” she cried out enthusiastically. “I haven't seen you in ages!”

The two women embraced over the bar and Harry looked on, feeling slightly bemused before he finally recognized who he was looking at: Madam Rosmerta. She didn't look very different from how he remembered her from his Hogwarts days – the lines on her face had gotten a little deeper and there were a few more strands of gray hair on top of her head, but she still seemed full of life and good humor. The bartender's eyes came to rest on Harry and a sly grin spread out across her face.

“So this is who you show up with,” she said more to herself than to either one of them. “After months of not seeing you, Luna, and *years* of missing young Mister Potter here, I finally get to see both of you at once!”

Luna beamed at the other woman. “The Cannons won their first match of the season,” she said. “So we're here to celebrate, if you know what I mean,” she added with a wink.

“I'm sure I do,” Rosmerta replied sagely, nodding as she went off to prepare their drinks.

Harry rested his chin in his hands and he stared around the newly renovated tavern, savoring the sight of it all and the delicious aroma of food being prepared in the kitchen. “I don't remember the Three Broomsticks being like this,” he remarked.

“It was ransacked during the occupation,” Luna told him. “Fortunately Madam Rosmerta was able to leave Hogsmeade before that happened, though. She only reopened last month since the damage took so long to fix!”

"The occupation...?" he asked, but he was cut off by the return of Rosmerta.

She set two mugs down in front of them filled with a foamy, sweet smelling, light blue liquid. Harry warily observed his drink.

"These aren't Screaming Banshees, are they?"

"I assume Tom's been serving you drinks at the Leaky Cauldron?" Rosmerta's grin grew even wider as Harry nodded rather sheepishly, still eyeing his drink with caution, half expecting it to burst into song and dance at any moment. "Don't you worry, dear, it's just a drink. No screaming from these ones."

With another wink she turned and vanished back into the kitchen, leaving Harry and Luna alone at the bar. She raised her mug in the air.

"I propose a toast," she said, speaking as if she was at a formal event.

"Very well then," he answered, raising his own mug in return. "To the Cannons!"

Before the glass touched his lips Luna cried out, "No, no!" and he paused to stare at her. Luna gave him a pleased look and then she said levelly, "To your timely return to the wizarding world, Harry."

For a second he didn't say or do anything, he just sat there looking at her. Luna's earnest smile didn't falter under his gaze, however, so he inclined his head and they touched their glasses together with a soft *clink*. After a long moment, he lowered his half-empty glass to the bar. Luna, he noticed, was still gulping down her drink and he watched in astonishment as the blue liquid vanished from her glass until it was all gone. With gusto, she slammed it onto the counter.

"Rosie!" she called out. "I'll have another one!"

Harry gaped at her, glancing back and forth between her and the empty mug. He hadn't known Luna could do *that*. She saw him doing this and a very un-Luna like giggle escaped her lips.

“Surprised, Harry?”

“Er, yeah, a little,” he muttered in return, watching her with amusement. Just then, a house elf appeared by her side with another drink for her and he sidled away after she took it from him.

“Another toast!” she called out, raising her new mug in the air too quickly. A little bit of the liquid sloshed over the sides and splashed out on the counter.

“Um-”

“Not to the Cannons,” she said, her words slurring themselves. “Or to your return...”

“Then to what...?”

“Just to you, Harry frickin' Potter! A toast to you, Harry!” she cheered sloppily. A few curious heads from around the room turned to watch the drunk girl at the bar and then, just as she had done mere moments before, she gulped down the drink all at once.

When she was finished, she leaned over the counter and rested her cheek on the cool surface as she tilted her head to look at Harry. He cast a few timid glances around the bar and was grateful to see that nobody was paying them very much attention anymore. Luna beamed at him as he reached over to her, to help her to sit up straight again.

“Oh, give me a hug!” She lurched towards him, throwing her arms at him.

“I'd rather-” he said lamely as she hung onto him, humming contentedly.

“I'm so glad you came with me tonight,” she mumbled into his chest.

“Er, yeah, me too,” he replied quickly. His mind was racing. What should he do? Luna was drunk!

Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed Madam Rosmerta step behind the bar again.

"Madam Rosmerta!" he called out, holding Luna up in her seat so she wouldn't spill out onto the floor. "Could you come here, please?"

"Why certainly-" she halted in mid sentence and put a hand to her chest when she saw how clearly inebriated Luna was.

"How much alcohol was in those drinks?"

"Not very much," she answered, watching Luna with a hint of a smile dancing across her lips. "There was less than a shot of firewhisky in each one..."

Harry grunted as he shifted Luna around in his arms, struggling to keep her sitting up. She flashed him a dreamy grin.

"I'd better get her home-"

"No-" Luna interrupted him lazily, blinking a few times and squirming in his grip.

"-she seems to be bit of a lightweight," he finished as he stood up, pulling Luna to her feet next to him.

Madam Rosmerta nodded as she took a cloth out and idly began to polish the bar top where Luna had spilled her drink. "If you want, you can Disapparate directly from here. Take her home, Harry." Then with a knowing smile on her face she added, "And take good care of her."

"Of course I will," he responded, moving gracelessly as he held Luna upright.

"No," she repeated quietly, shaking her head. "The war..."

Harry squinted at her, trying to decipher what she was telling him. The war? Wasn't the war with Voldemort over now?

"Luna, what are you talking about?" he asked her as he leaned in closer to her so he could hear her better.

“The, w-wards-” she said again. Then comprehension dawned on Harry and he realized what she was saying. Of *course* he couldn't Apparate into her house, she'd needed to do something special with her wand to get them past the wards... and judging by the somewhat less than coherent state of mind she was in now, Luna didn't appear to be in any condition to be performing complicated wandwork anytime soon.

“Well, we can't stay here,” he pointed out. “Looks like you're coming home with me.”

“Mmm,” was all she said as he closed his eyes and focused on the spell.

An instant later they were gone.

As soon as they Apparated into his flat, Harry gently guided Luna over to his living room where he eased her onto the sofa; slowly, carefully, he laid her down so she was in a comfortable reclining position. He unfolded the blanket he kept on the arm of the couch and covered her body with it, making sure to tuck it in under her chin. With a faint smile tugging at his lips, he stepped back and admired his handiwork. Luna's eyes were closed and her breathing was even – she had passed out soon after she'd lied down – and Harry couldn't help but think of how fragile she looked just lying there all by herself, so small against the thick blanket and the overstuffed cushions.

He felt an impulsive urge to stay in the room with her, to sleep on the floor beside her, to watch her to make sure she remained safe all night. Harry gritted his teeth together and scratched the back of his neck as he watched her, hesitating in the doorway, unsure of whether he should stay or if he should go.

“You can stay,” came Luna's soft voice. Her pale eyes were open, observing him. “If you'd like, that is.”

His decision had been made for him. He quietly tiptoed over to her and sat down, leaning his back against the couch, so their heads were at the same end.

"Thanks again, Luna," he quietly said to her. "Tonight was a really great night. I – I think I needed it."

"You deserved it," she replied plainly, giving him a nudge on the shoulder.

Something deep inside of him cried out in joy as she said those words, followed by the unexpected sensation of tears beginning to form in his eyes. There was a *feeling* he got from being around her, a feeling of trust, of camaraderie, of affection – it was a feeling that brought with it the knowledge that he had a true friend in Luna, someone who cared for him and who would stick by him in the face of adversity. He turned around to thank her, to hold her hand and tell her how good of a friend she was to him, but he never got the chance.

He had opened his mouth to say something along the lines of, "Thanks, Luna, you're such a great person and I'm so grateful to have you as my friend," except her lips intercepted his in midair, not giving him a chance to say thank you or even react at all. Luna's hand was caressing his cheek and her other hand was roaming around in small circles on his chest – and Harry was lost in the moment. He was lost in the kiss, lost in the blissful haze of Luna, temporarily putting his woes aside and escaping from the gray, narrow confines of his life.

And like so many good things in the world, it was over much too soon, leaving the two breathless and lightheaded in a dark living room.

"Merlin," moaned Luna, letting her head fall back onto the sofa, "I've wanted to do that for years, Harry."

"You've *what?*" he asked, startled by what she'd just told him. But she didn't answer him. A quick glance over at her showed him that her eyes were shut again and she was breathing deeply.

As he rose from where he was sitting and exited the living room, the pleasurable fog began to dissipate in his head and another one of life's cruel miseries trickled back into his consciousness: guilt. What had he just done? Snogging Nora was okay, it was fine, it was safe, it was *in bounds*, but Luna? Harry felt like he had just crossed over some invisible line and the Romance Police were coming to arrest him. Luna was a friend, wasn't she? Yet when he thought about it, the

kiss *had* been astonishingly mind blowing... and *she* had been the one to start it...

What was he thinking? It didn't matter how good it had been, he'd just cheated on Nora! While Harry was still relatively young and inexperienced in romantic matters, he was sharp enough to know that this was a *very* bad situation indeed.

“Oh, Harry Potter,” he groaned to himself, “what are you going to do with yourself now?”

A/N 9/23/06:

Coming in Chapter 9: Luna seduces, Harry confesses, Nora takes a stand, and Dumbledore, well, he does his Dumbledore thing. Things start to fall apart... the end is near!

## Obliviate – Chapter Nine

Harry awoke the next morning to discover Luna had already gotten up and was busying about his kitchen preparing breakfast. She casually glanced up at him from her place by the stove where she was scrambling some eggs.

“Good morning, Harry,” she said fondly. “Sleep well?”

“Er, yes,” he replied even though he hadn't slept very well at all; he'd spent most of the night lying restlessly in bed, staring up at the ceiling, brooding over the recent events which had happened to him. His thoughts hadn't brought him to any sort of conclusion, so he was left standing awkwardly in the doorway of the kitchen feeling uncertain of how he should behave around Luna. Then he asked, “Um, do you need any help?”

“No,” she answered, nodding her head over towards the table. “Take a seat. I'm almost done.”

Harry sat down and started nervously tapping his foot on the floor. He watched as Luna moved with a fluid grace around his kitchen, scrambling the eggs, fixing the toast, pouring orange juice for both of them, and his mind wandered off yet again to the night before. She had told him, “I've wanted to do that for years,”

For *years*? Luna Lovegood?

No.

Yes.

Maybe.

Quite possibly maybe. There had been so much urgency and desire in that single kiss that the memory of Nora's was paling in comparison... No, he couldn't think that.

Well, he *shouldn't* think that, but there was something exciting about Luna; she was like a gust of fresh air after spending too much time inside of a cave. She was so delightfully eccentric and mysterious,



which gave Harry the feeling that there was an untamed side to Luna he hadn't seen yet. It was intriguing and provocative and he wanted to see more of her and get to know the part of Luna he hadn't met yet.

So what was Nora? Nora certainly had a wild side to her – he'd witnessed that part of her firsthand in the Muggle restaurant the other day – but she wasn't the same as Luna. When he was around Nora, he felt a sense of comfort and security. They were quieter and gentler traits but they still invited him back for more whenever he saw her.

He sighed. Two women. Only one choice. What was he supposed to do?

*'Come on, Harry!' he thought to himself. 'You're a Gryffindor, aren't you? Go on and get it over with.'*

Luna walked over to the table holding two plates. She pecked him on the cheek and gave him a dreamy smile before sitting down next to him. He half-heartedly returned the gesture and poked around at the eggs on his plate as he apprehensively chewed on the inside of his cheek.

"I think," Harry finally said, hoping he sounded more courageous than he felt, "I think we need to talk about some things, Luna."

"What an excellent idea," she responded.

He blinked. "What?"

"It's such a good idea that you want to talk about our relationship, Harry," she stated simply, taking a small bite out of her toast.

"Um." He wasn't sure what to make of how she was acting, so he just inclined his head and said, "Yes."

"I hope you don't mind that I kissed you last night," Luna continued, glancing at him curiously. "I don't know if I told you, but I've wanted to do that for a long time."

He held his breath and felt her watching him, searching his features, waiting for him to say something. After a few seconds ticked by and

he did not speak, Luna gave him a reassuring smile and rested her hand over his.

"It's okay if you don't have anything to say." She rested her head on his shoulder. "You don't have to say anything to impress me."

Harry tried to swallow the boulder that had suddenly lodged itself in his throat.

"Oh sweet Merlin," he muttered to himself.

"What was that?"

"Er-" he said, his voice shaking slightly, "Oh, sweet Luna."

She giggled and he felt her lean closer to him until her breath tickled his neck. Then she whispered in his ear, "I really like you, Harry."

"I really like you too," he replied, his words sounding strained.

Luna's face inched nearer to his until their noses were brushing together. Suddenly she was perched in his lap and her arms had wrapped themselves around his waist; her eyes locked with his and from the way she was pressing up against Harry, he could feel every single minute curve of her body and he felt the blood rushing through his veins.

"Um. Luna, I have to be at work soon."

"So?" she breathed, shifting around on top of him.

Why were the women in his life so domineering? Then again, maybe it wasn't the women – maybe it was just him being insecure and a bit too passive, letting people just walk all over him. However, it didn't really matter because it seemed like Luna was going to get her way right now either way.

"Um," he repeated since he had nothing else to say.

Her hand slithered from around his side and came to rest on the inside of his thigh. "Just try to relax and enjoy yourself..."

Sam glanced at Harry curiously. He slapped another sticker reading "SHIP TO GLENDALE" onto the box in front of them and shoved it off to the side.

"You know, you look worn today," he remarked, keeping his tone neutral. Although they got along well, he didn't want to provoke his coworker – he could tell something was eating away at him and he didn't want to cause a scene.

"I'm okay," he answered. "I've seen better days."

They hauled another box into position and Harry put a sticker on it.

"Everything going all right with Nora?"

The younger man paused and shrugged. "You could say so, yeah."

In a mildly reproachful voice Sam asked, "What's that supposed to mean?"

Harry wearily sat down on the box and sighed noisily. "It's not Nora that's the problem, mate... it's someone else..."

"I see," Sam replied, sounding indifferent.

"She's an old friend and she-"

"Wait, wait, wait," he said, waving his hands in front of him. "You've been seeing Nora for *two days* and already you've cheated on her?"

"Er," Harry muttered, feeling stupid.

Sam gave him a stern look. "You can't keep on with this, you know. Sooner or later it's going to end, and it's going to end *badly*."

"But I don't know what to do," came the feeble response.

"Have you tried talking to either one of them?"

"Yeah," he said, running a hand through his hair, "but then she just grabbed me and-"

“Okay! I don't need details!”

Harry exhaled and his shoulders sagged. “I really like Nora. A lot. But this other girl... she's something special.” He stared up at the ceiling with a faraway look in his eyes. “It's like they're the best of two worlds, Sam. They've both got a wild side, I've seen it-” His partner frowned at him. “-but they're so *different*. I can't explain it, and I definitely can't choose.”

After a long moment Sam finally nodded and shrugged resignedly. “James,” he said, “it sounds like you're in a right foul mess.”

“I know,” he replied, kicking at an empty box on the ground.

“But,” he added quickly, “since *you're* my friend and they aren't, I have to tell you, go do whatever makes *you* happy.”

“Thanks, Sam.”

She sat in her comfy chair, anxiously swinging her feet, feeling her stomach fold in on itself and do somersaults. Nora had arrived home from work minutes ago to find that there was a fire in her house. She would have been less scared to find it burning outside the fireplace.

A fire used to mean quiet evenings, a glass of wine, and losing herself in a good book. However, recently, a fire meant that her creepy fireplace resident was going to drop in and have a little talk with her. She drew her knees up to her chest like a child, closing her eyes and counting in her head in an attempt to calm herself down.

*One, two, three...*

Any moment now, the flames were going to turn green and *he* would pop up...

*Seven, eight, nine...*

He would ask her about James – *Harry* – whoever. But she knew that she would be able to protect him. She cared for him too much to give him up now.

Any minute now, any second-

The fireplace suddenly shifted its colors into a sickly green hue and it sneezed out her least favorite person in the world, Albus Dumbledore. He righted the crooked spectacles on his face and gave her a kindly smile. She was not fooled by his act.

"Headmaster."

"Miss O'Connor," he said as he inclined his head ever so slightly. He made as if to move off over to her kitchen. "Would you like a-"

"No," she stated dully, gesturing to the couch opposite from where she was seated. "If you came here to talk, then let's talk and get it over with."

If Dumbledore was surprised by her bluntness, he did not show it. He idly stroked his long, wispy beard as he sat down. He leaned forward, peering at her with that unnerving sky blue gaze.

"Tell me, Miss O'Connor," he murmured, his eyes unblinking, "how is our dear Harry?"

"He's fine," she answered evasively.

"Is he?" the old man replied quietly, letting his voice drift. "Is he really?"

Suddenly he was standing a foot away from her, no longer seeming old and weak. His piercing stare cut straight through her, making her shiver. As much as she wanted to, she could not tear her eyes away from his; there was something magnetic about them and she felt a curious sensation in her head, as if she was reliving certain memories... and all of them revolved around James...

She struggled to close her eyes but failed. "Stop. Stop it, please!" she cried out. Never before in her entire life had she felt so vulnerable and exposed.

"Miss O'Connor, you haven't been very truthful with me," Dumbledore said. Did she detect a tone of resignation in his voice? Did that mean

he was going to leave her alone now? “I gave you explicit orders not to get... *involved*.”

Oh, so he knew now, did he? He was *not* going to take James away from her. She tilted her chin up and looked at him defiantly. “You are not going to come between us.”

Dumbledore continued on as if she hadn't said a word. “This is a very delicate situation, Nora-” She glared at the use of her first name “-he doesn't need the emotional stress of a relationship-”

“*Why not?*” she shouted at him. “I think that's *exactly* what he needs! Haven't you seen him lately? He goes about every single day not feeling, not caring – he, he was so *miserable* until we met! Why do you want to take this away from him? From us?”

“My dear,” he said, taken aback by her sudden ferocity. “I'm afraid you're placing too much stock in his feelings for you.”

“What do you mean?” she whispered, sitting very still.

The headmaster chose to ignore her question. “Now, I need to know the names of everyone who knows about you two. I'm already aware of his coworkers and those unfortunate Muggles at the restaurant who happened to see you.” Then he added seriously, “Even if you don't tell me, I will find out.”

Nora gritted her teeth together. So now he was threatening her? She'd had enough.

“Albus Dumbledore,” she exclaimed boldly as she rose to her feet, “get *out* of my house!”

He raised his eyebrows and then instead of turning to leave, he did something that scared her. Calmly, slowly, he reached into his robes and withdrew a long, slender piece of wood. Nora gulped – it was undoubtedly a magic wand. And judging from the way he was pointing it at her, he was going to use it.

A moment passed, tension thick in the air. Finally the wizard said, “I'm sorry it had to come to this, Nora.”

She glanced at him with frightened eyes. "Yeah," she said softly. "Me too."

There was a persistent buzzing sound ringing in her ears and she raced through the house, heading for the fireplace. Her father had installed a magical equivalent of a Muggle doorbell, so someone trying to contact them by Floo would just have to push a button and anyone in the house would be summoned immediately.

Entering the living room, she knelt down by the hearth, a bit surprised to find nobody waiting for her. A few feet in front of the fireplace, an envelope was lying on the floor. Luna peered at it curiously and flipped it over, to see that it bore the official wax seal of The Quibbler, her father's publication. The seal was warm to the touch, as if it had just been pressed moments ago.

"That's odd," she muttered to herself. "I wonder why he didn't want to talk to me in person."

Without a second thought about it, she used a cutting spell to slice open the envelope and a small piece of parchment slipped out and fell to the floor. She picked it up and unfolded it, her eyes going wide as she read the first words. It was her father's hand writing, that she was sure of, but it was sloppy and looked like it had been hastily written:

*Luna, I'm leaving for Hogsmeade. We just received an anonymous tip from someone inside Hogwarts that Harry Potter was "missing" for all those years because Dumbledore was holding him captive in the school. If this is true, there could be a major scandal. I want you to-*

She didn't bother to finish reading the rest of the letter. While she loved her father dearly and always listened to him, there were more pressing matters at hand.

Luna needed to find Harry.

He had the feeling of déjà vu when he returned to his flat to be greeted by Luna. However, unlike yesterday, there was no suggestiveness to her movements and she appeared to be very nervous.

"Luna," he said, seeing her standing in his doorway again, "did you even leave here this morning?"

"Harry, we have to go to Hogwarts."

The name of his old school awkwardly hung between them, making the air feel stifling and much too humid.

"Why?"

She took a step closer and looked him straight in the eye. "Haven't you wondered where you were after you defeated Voldemort?"

"Luna," he said exasperatedly, "I haven't had much time in the last few days to wonder about that, especially since-

"You were missing for *two years*, Harry."

"I... what?"

He hadn't known that he'd lost so much time and her words came as a shock to him. Although traveling through Luna's memories had helped him to recall many of his own, he still didn't know how he came to be James Evans, champion of shifting around boxes the good old fashioned Muggle way. How had he gone from being the savior of the wizarding world to being what he was now?

"We need to go to Hogwarts, Harry," she pleaded earnestly. "To find some answers." Then she added, "For you."

He looked at Luna and finally gave her a solemn nod.

While ignorance was bliss, how could he go on living without knowing what had happened to him for two years of his life? The question would always remain with him and it would eat him from the inside out if he never discovered the answer. Going to Hogwarts was his chance to know, to find the truth about himself.

'*Gryffindor courage!*' he thought to himself cheerlessly.



“We're going to Hogsmeade,” said Luna, interrupting his thoughts and grabbing his arm. “I'll take us there.”

**A/N 9/23/06:**

There are three hints for where I got the names Sam and Nate from in this chapter. Heh. Reviews are always appreciated!

## Obliviate – Chapter Ten

Although he should have anticipated the throngs of journalists, photographers, and curious bystanders, Harry Potter was utterly unprepared for the swarms of ravenous reporters to come bearing down on him the moment he Apparated into the Three Broomsticks. Fortunately, Luna had adjusted her destination so they thankfully avoided another awkward situation in the coat room, yet they now found themselves on the main floor of the tavern. Seconds later-

“Mister Potter-”

“A moment of your time-”

“You ought to be outraged-”

*Flash, flash, flash.* The lights of the magical cameras surrounding them kept going off and even when he closed his eyes he still saw the neon colored afterimages floating around on the backs of his eyelids. Luna clung firmly onto his arm, serving as an anchor to his sanity – she hadn't let go of him since they'd first appeared at the bar. He spared a fleeting glance at her profile beside him and marveled at the way she could look so cool, so calm, so *composed* in the face of all the hysteria. However, she was, after all, a journalist herself, so he figured she was quite accustomed to dealing with the wild hordes that constituted the wizarding media.

People kept peppering him with questions, trying to elicit any sort of response, but he was beyond listening to them and trying to sort out their words to make sense of the noises. It was all just an annoying buzz in his ears and he groaned out loud, resolutely squeezing his eyes shut and reaching his hands up to massage his aching temples. Why did they have to be so aggressive? He decided that life could be much more pleasant if all of the journalists would just shut up and quietly lie down on the floor-

Suddenly there was a deafening thunderclap and Harry dropped to the ground, covering his head and he saw others around him do the same. An unsettling silence filled the void where there had been pandemonium only moments before and he slowly raised his head, surveying the damage.

However, there was no damage to be found – and Harry noticed with a certain amount of surprise that Luna was standing tall, her wand drawn and pointed up in the air. He realized then that her wand had been the source of the explosion.

Gradually the journalists lying scattered about on the floor of the Three Broomsticks made their way to their feet and there was noise again, steadily growing in volume; the tumult was beginning anew-

Luna jabbed her wand in the air and another explosion of sound ripped through the bar. Fewer people ducked down this time but the room was silent once more. She lowered her arm and helped to pull Harry to his feet. Luna struck a defiant pose, sending challenging stares around the room and making eye contact with as many people as she could. With an unwavering tone of authority, she announced to the bar, “No comment.”

With the firm declaration of those two words, the assorted witches and wizards who had been so eager to interrogate Harry minutes ago now grudgingly allowed him to sweep past them and exit the bar.

A disgruntled looking Rita Skeeter called out, “You won't be able to get to the castle! It's sealed itself off from everyone!”

Harry didn't even bother to look over his shoulder at the disgusting reporter. He'd find a way in; he was sure of it.

Outside, the sun hovered indecisively above the horizon, reluctantly beginning to set, allowing the evening to steal the sky. There were other buildings lined up and down the road next to the Three Broomsticks and at the end, Harry could clearly make out the outline of Hogwarts in the distance. His breathing sped up at the sight of his old school, his old home for so many years – he had remembered it of course, had remembered the professors, the students, his adventures – but he had forgotten the sheer beauty of the castle. Even from far away in Hogsmeade, Harry stood rooted to the ground, captivated by the sun's rays washing over the elegant stone walls and spires. A shiver slid down his spine.

He was back.

"Harry?" Luna asked patiently, reaching for his arm. "Come on, we need to start walking."

"Right," he murmured, his eyes still transfixed upon the school.

They walked in an anxious silence, both concealing their fears and misgivings about their current adventure behind masks of determination. After some time, they finally reached the gates, however when Harry tried to open them, they would not budge. He impatiently rattled the steel bars and rashly decided to kick them, which he regretted an instant later as he angrily nursed his sore foot.

"Now what?" he growled, scowling at the closed gates. "We can't get in."

Luna studied the massive old gates and poked her wand at them inquisitively. An uncanny frown came across her face. "I don't remember the last time these were locked."

"It *has* been quite a while, hasn't it?"

At the sound of the unexpected voice, they whirled around, wands out and ready-

"Professor McGonagall!" Harry cried out, immediately lowering his arm.

She shot both of them a thin-lipped smile and tilted her head ever so slightly. "Mister Potter."

"Oh, good evening, professor," said Luna, as if just noticing her for the first time.

"Likewise, Miss Lovegood." McGonagall arched an eyebrow. "Here to see Albus, are you?"

"Yes, please," answered Luna, nodding pleasantly. "It's really quite urgent."

The old witch regarded Harry with an odd expression on her face; for a heartbeat, he thought he saw a shimmer in her eyes, an unshed

tear – in that moment it appeared as if her features softened ever so slightly, but he blinked and she was once again Minerva McGonagall, his former Transfigurations professor and Deputy Headmistress of Hogwarts. She stepped forward with her wand drawn and touched the tip of it to the gate. There was a gust of wind and a loud *click* as the gates unlocked and swung open with a groan. Wearing a wry smile, she shrugged and said, “I suppose Albus didn't want to keep *me* out.”

“What were you doing outside of the castle, professor?” Harry blurted out, snapping his mouth shut a second later as he realized how rude it must have sounded. “I'm sorry, I didn't mean-”

“It's quite all right, Harry,” McGonagall responded as they began walking up to the school, Harry and Luna flanking her. “If you really must know, I was speaking to some of the journalists.” She turned to face Luna and added, “Your father is rather polite. I'd never met him before.”

The younger woman beamed at the praise. “Did he ask you any questions about Professor Dumbledore?”

McGonagall nodded pensively and opened her mouth, as if she was hesitating to say something. “Yes. In fact, the reason everyone is in Hogsmeade is because... well, I called them here.”

“You did?” Harry gave her a quizzical stare. “Why?”

Another wan smile spread out across the professor's face. “I'm afraid that's something you'll have to take up with the headmaster. Ah, here we are.”

They had reached a rarely used side entrance and with another flick of a wand from McGonagall, the trio were now safely inside the castle and on their way to see the headmaster. When they arrived at the stone gargoyle which guarded the spiral staircase to his office, McGonagall stopped and put a hand over Luna's shoulder.

“I think it would be best if Harry went up alone.”

“No!” she protested. “He could get hurt again-”

"Hurt?" he asked cautiously, tensing up at the thought of physical pain.

McGonagall shook her head and held firmly onto Luna. "Harry won't get hurt. Dumbledore is in the spotlight – he can't and he won't risk hurting him now."

Having the two women talking about him as if wasn't even there was a bit unnerving for Harry. He raised his voice. "How could I get hurt? Why would Dumbledore want to hurt me?"

They both stopped and stared at him. McGonagall gave him a pitying look while Luna diverted her gaze to her feet and did not speak. An ugly silence fell over all three of them until at last McGonagall said disbelievingly, "You didn't tell him *anything*?"

"We didn't have the time," muttered Luna, still keeping her head down.

"Well," she began, shooting an anxious glance at Harry, "I dare say you'll find out soon enough. Go on up. He's waiting for you."

As if on cue, there was the sound of stone grinding upon stone and the gargoyle shifted into motion as the stairs began to rise up. He gulped and stood on the first step and waited as he was taken to the top.

What mysteries awaited him in the headmaster's office? What secrets would he unravel?

What would he learn about himself?

The stairs ground to a halt and he found himself looking up at an imposing wooden door. Unexpectedly it opened of its own accord, allowing him inside the office. He warily stepped in, peering about carefully at the portraits and the shelves lining the walls stacked with books. Fawkes was perched on his stand over on Dumbledore's desk, appearing very unconcerned with life and the shiny, whirling contraptions scattered about in their places.

"Hello, Harry," a tired voice called out. Dumbledore appeared suddenly out of a small door he'd never noticed before. The

headmaster stood in front of him with his hands clasped together, wearing a grave

“Professor.”

“We've been waiting a long time to see each other, haven't we?” the old man asked. Harry noticed that his normally cheery, lively demeanor was disturbingly absent and in its place was an overwhelming sense of fatigue and weariness. “Please,” he said, conjuring an armchair with a wave of his wand. “Have a seat.”

The hospitality he was receiving was confusing, to say the least. From what he had managed to piece together from the fragmented conversation between Luna and McGonagall moments before, Dumbledore was supposedly some sort of threat to him. So why didn't he feel... worried at all?

“I insist,” he went on, gesturing to the vacant seat as he conjured one for himself and sat down.

Harry relented and seated himself.

“Professor,” he began reluctantly, feeling a sense of discomfort beginning to wash over him as he looked into the headmaster's dull eyes. “Where have I been for the last two years? Why was I living as a Muggle, without any idea of who I really was?” Dumbledore's lip twitched as Harry continued, “And why... why are all of my friends *dead?*”

He wanted to feel angry at Dumbledore, he really did. In fact, while he had felt apprehensive on the way up to this office, he had also had every intention of chewing him out, giving the old man a piece of his mind, and if necessary, using physical force to get him to cooperate. But now, as he regarded the tired man sitting across from him, all the aggression and enmity in his system evaporated. There was something in the other man's countenance that was dead and gone – and how could you attack something that wasn't there?

“Harry,” Dumbledore started, his words grave, “before I say anything else, I want you to know that what I did was for your protection-”

"Against *what?*" he cried, a halfhearted surge of frustration leaking out into his words, making his voice crack. "Protect me from what? From Voldemort? I *killed* him, didn't I?"

Dumbledore sighed and rested his chin in the palm of his hand, allowing a faint sigh to escape his lips. "Yes, you did kill him." Then before Harry could say anything else, he added, "I did it to protect you from *yourself*."

"From... myself?" he wondered out loud, feeling completely bewildered. What was he talking about? This wasn't making *any* sense. "What do you mean?"

"Care for a lemon drop, Harry?" the headmaster asked mildly. "This is going to take a while to explain."

Then, for the first time he could remember, Harry accepted the candy and sat back in his seat, ready to hear the story of his past.

It was an old, dilapidated, ordinary farmhouse. And it was where Lord Voldemort had fled to and made his base of operations. Granted, it was buried deep within the countryside, had Muggle-repelling charms surrounding it for miles, was Unplottable, and had just about every other form of magical protection on it known to the wizarding world, but they had *found* it. As Harry Potter regarded the battered house through his Omnioculars one more time, he couldn't help but think to himself, '*At least Voldemort could have gone down with a little bit more style.*'

"Are you ready, mate?" came the inquiring, reassuring voice of Ron. His best friend gave him a rough pat on the back and did his best to shoot him a goofy, carefree smile. "This is it. This is the *end*."

"We really ought to hurry," chimed in Hermione, a hint of worry written in her features. "I'm sure he knows we're already here. The protection spells-"

"Yes, Hermione, we know *all* about the protection spells by now," asserted Harry, not taking his eyes off the unimposing house in the distance. "But I'm ready for him. We all are." And he meant it.



Over the last year after Harry had decided not to return to Hogwarts, the three friends had scoured the corners of the world, seeking out the last of Voldemort's Horcruxes. Once they had finally managed to collect and destroy them all, their true hunt for the Dark Lord had commenced and, within days, it had led them to this place:

A rickety house in the middle of nowhere with no visible outward defenses. It felt too easy.

"How much longer are we going to wait, Harry?" asked Hermione urgently. Although they had endured unspeakable horrors on their quest to find the Horcruxes, she still tended to get nervous in situations when they weren't doing anything. "I've already figured out the spells on the doors, the windows, and the-"

"We're not going in through the doors or the windows," he said placidly, handing the Omnioculars to her. "Take a look. We're going in through the roof."

Sure enough, there was a gap in the shingles just large enough for any of them to fit through. Harry straightened his shoulders out and reached for his Firebolt. "Brooms out, let's go!"

Hermione groaned and Ron found the good humor to laugh at her. Moments later they were off under the cover of night, soaring over towards the house. Less than ten seconds later they had landed on the roof and with the aid of a few well-placed silencing charms, they stealthily dropped down into the second floor, all facing apart from each other, wands held at the ready.

But there were no Death Eaters lying in wait for them. There was no Lord Voldemort lurking the shadows of what looked to be a musty bedroom. In fact, there wasn't much of anything in the room with them except for a bed with a collapsed leg and some scattered bits of wood and roofing tile. Moonbeams meagerly poured in through what was left of the aged, blurry, glass windows and cast its pale light around, blanketing everything and everyone with its silver sheen.

Ron gave Harry a questioning look, knowing better than to speak out loud. Harry simply shrugged and silently motioned for the two to follow him. They moved in perfect coordination from room to room,

searching for Voldemort but not finding anything – no hidden Death Eaters, no dark artifacts, not even anything as mundane as a spell book.

The sweep of the first and second floors produced nothing. There was an empty space in the kitchen where the stove should have been; there was no other furniture in any other room besides the bedroom and the living room, where there was a ragged, stained couch, and there was a thick layer of dust coating the walls and the floors as if nobody had lived in the house for many years.

However, as they were about to admit defeat and leave, Hermione tugged anxiously on Harry's sleeve and nodded her head over towards a closed door in a corner they had missed. Cautiously pushing it open, they discovered a set of stairs that descended down into a pitch black basement. Giving his companions each a momentary glance, Harry kept his jaw firmly set as he stepped carefully down into the darkness. Ron followed him and Hermione brought up the rear.

"Something's *wet*," remarked Ron in a whisper when they reached the bottom. "I can feel it seeping through my trainers-"

"W-what's that smell?" came Hermione's nervous voice.

"*Lumos*," called out Harry, extending his arm and fully seeing the basement for the first time.

Moist, uneven, earthen walls enclosed the single large room they were standing in. Overhead, rusty nails jutted haphazardly through rotting wooden floorboards. The air was stale and smelled of death. And there was an inch of dark maroon blood covering the floor.

"Oh my god," muttered Hermione, clasping a hand to her mouth and pointing over to a corner with her free hand. "*Look*."

Lying, heaped up in a graceless pile like so many cast aside toy dolls, were the limp bodies of a dozen people. Harry courageously walked up to them and saw that their faces and hands were worn and gaunt and pale as bleached bone. Their lifeless eyes stared off into nothingness, their mouths were frozen open in silent screams of pain-

They were the last Death Eaters.

Even after braving the long, arduous journey to get to where he was standing right now, Harry couldn't help himself. He took a weak step backwards, nearly slipping on the slick blood, and vomited. Hermione gave him a sympathetic look and retreated into Ron's outstretched, comforting arm.

After some time where nobody spoke and Harry had not yet stood back up, Ron cleared his throat. "There's... there's a thingie over there..." His voice trailed off as he strode over to an ordinary looking section of the wall and he pressed his hand to it in various places. Neither Harry nor Hermione said anything as he did this, they just watched, moving into position behind him. Suddenly he let out a triumphant "Aha!" and tapped his wand several times against the hardened soil. "Just like at the orphanage..."

The section of wall Ron had just magicked flickered and abruptly faded away, showing them a short corridor with a plain wooden door at the end. They all hesitated to go any farther as they noticed a pulsing light escaping around the cracks in the doorway. Gulping visibly, Harry stepped forward, only dimly aware that Ron and Hermione were loyally following behind him.

At last they reached the door, the light seeming to pulse more strongly as they drew nearer, and Harry pushed it open.

"Harry Potter," drawled Lord Voldemort, his gleaming eyes coming to rest upon the trio. "And I see you've brought your little friends... how *endearing*."

He regarded the Dark Lord, his jaw hanging open slightly but his wand still pointed firmly at him. Voldemort's features looked thin and haggard, as if he hadn't eaten in days, and his skin appeared more sallow than how he remembered it the last time they'd met. Harry noticed after a moment that his breathing sounded labored and he was clutching feebly at his chest as he sat on the bloody floor before them, his back propped up against the dirt wall. Hermione gasped as she came into sight of him and Ron smirked mirthlessly as he saw Voldemort in such a weakened state.

"You're done, Tom," stated Harry coldly.

"Yes..." hissed the dark wizard, closing his eyes. They still glowed red behind his eyelids. "Soon, but not yet. Perhaps... we can... strike a deal-" he coughed viciously and black blood splattered around his lips.

"I don't think you're in any position to be making bargains."

"Do you..." he began. He raised his arm and all three of them tensed up visibly and leveled their wands at him, but he merely pointed over to an unnoticed corner where another body rested; tousled red hair lie bunched up around a delicate face...

"You son of a-" Harry spat out, his arm shaking with rage. "I'll-"

"She's not... dead," breathed Voldemort with some difficulty. Then he added with a hint of malice behind his words, "Although she will be... if you continue... on like this."

The trio froze in place, not wanting to jeopardize Ginny's life.

"I-" Voldemort coughed yet again and more blood came from his mouth. His upper lip curled into a sneer. "I must confess... I never thought losing my Horcruxes... would leave me... like this."

"That's a crying shame, isn't it?" pointed out Ron.

"Six parts of your soul are *gone*," Hermione added. "It's a wonder you're still able to speak." She pursed her lips and narrowed her eyes. "You killed-"

"For a Mudblood you're remarkable quick," he commented, smirking at them all. Then, between ragged breaths, he said, "Suffice it to say... the corrupted souls of a few dozen... of my most faithful can... only carry one so far..."

"You're sick," she spat, looking at him disdainfully.

"Enough," interrupted Harry, raising a hand to silence his friends. "What must we do in order for you to spare her life?"

Voldemort's lips twisted into a grin. He let out a shoulder-wracking, wheezy sigh and dropped his hands to his sides, palms open in an expression of resignation. "I... I will spare her if... you let me go."

Harry's lip twitched involuntarily. Voldemort was making a plea for his own life? He had never expected their final encounter to be anything like *this*. In all of his dreams and nightmares, they had dueled on the grounds of Hogwarts, in Diagon Alley, in Hogsmeade, and it had always been an epic battle – Voldemort's dozens of dark followers against the valiant yet hopelessly outnumbered Order of the Phoenix. He had always felt like he ought to be a *warrior*.

Instead, he felt like he was about to cut life support for an unarmed old man lying on his deathbed in a retirement home. The gears began to spin in his head and his narrowed eyes darted back and forth between Ginny and Voldemort. What had been done to her...? She was lying there very still, but there was a slight tinge of pink to her cheeks and her chest was moving up and down. It almost looked like...

"Harry?" asked Hermione tentatively, not taking her eyes off of Voldemort. "What are we going to do?"

"I say we finish him off right here and right now," growled Ron, seething over the fact that Ginny had been kidnapped. "Just say the word and we'll do it. Right, Hermione?"

"Harry?" she repeated, an urgent tone in her voice.

His jaw was clenched and he glared at Voldemort. He took a brave step forward and said, "I'm afraid we can't let you go." Harry pointed his wand over at Ginny. "And I think you're bluffing... *Rennervate!*"

Just as he'd expected her to, her eyes fluttered open and she sat up, holding her head and grimacing. A victorious grin came across Harry's face as his eyes met with Ginny's for the first time in over a year. Even in her disheveled state, she returned the smile and he felt relief wash over him. She'd only been Stunned! It made perfect sense because Voldemort could barely even lift his own arms...

The Dark Lord was watching him silently, yet there was something in his crimson eyes that nagged at the back of his mind and made him uneasy.

"I... gave you two choices." Although he had spoken in a whisper, everyone had gone quiet so they could hear him. "And now you will *die*."

Then before he could react, Ron angrily pushed past Harry and shouted, "AVADA KEDAV-" but a sickly, pale arm wrenched his wand out of his hands and snapped it in its cold grip. He spun around, a look of horror on his face as he looked into the unseeing, milky whites of Lucius Malfoy's eyes. "What the-"

The Inferius closed another hand around his neck and slowly raised him up into the air until his feet were dangling. Hermione shouted, "Ron!" and shot off a fire spell at the animated corpse, but it went wide of its mark as her arm was pulled out of the way by another Inferius. She turned her head and a panicked look came across her face as she saw the rest of the former Death Eaters clumsily stalking toward them. "Harry! *Get Voldemort!*"

"*Riddle!*" bellowed Harry, storming off toward Voldemort, who was still leaning against the wall, not making any move to defend himself.

Somewhere behind him he heard Ginny scream.

'*Ginny! She doesn't have a wand!*' he thought. He hastily spun away from Voldemort, noticing a slight smirk come across the wizard's face as he did so. But he didn't have time to fight him, not now when he had to help his friends ward off the Inferi.

"*Incendio!*" he shouted. Golden flames blasted out from the end of his wand and ignited the robes of another Death Eater. Several of the Inferi halted in their footsteps, shying away from the heat and light. "Hold on, Ginny! I'm coming!"

As he made his way over to her, shooting off flames at the walking corpses, he saw Ron get viciously thrown to the ground. His head collided brutally with the cement floor and he laid there, unmoving.

*“Ron!”* Hermione's anguished cry sliced through the din in the tiny room. Harry's eyes widened when he saw that she was being held from behind by two Inperi who were pulling at her hair and her arms, preventing her from reaching Ron. *“Harry! Help!”*

His eyes flashed dangerously and he sent a jet of searing fire onto one of the Inperi holding Hermione. It let out an inhuman wail but it did not relent in its assault and it jerked her arm violently; Harry heard his best friend's cry of pain as her shoulder was dislocated. He raised his wand to fire again but he was distracted by a yell in the opposite direction. *Ginny!* Harry whirled around, blindly letting loose with two fireballs. They each found their mark, burning a wide hole into the chest of Bellatrix Lestrange, but the damage was already done – three other Death Eaters had fallen over Ginny and were mercilessly clawing at her arms and her face.

*“Har-ry!”* It was Hermione. There were bright splotches of blood on her face but she was still in the fight. Her left arm hung uselessly by her side but her wand arm was outstretched and her hand was wide open. *“My wand!”*

There was too much going on – Ginny was about to be bludgeoned to death, Ron was minutes away from dying if he wasn't already dead, Hermione was about to be dismembered and she needed her wand, and what was Voldemort doing? Along the edge of his vision he saw Voldemort with his eyes closed, mumbling something under his breath-

But there was no time to deal with him. There were more pressing matters at hand.

Summoning all of the concentration he had, Harry searched for Hermione's wand along the ground and found it in less than a second. He dove toward it and did a roll, plucking it up along the way and sending it in her direction as he got up. His heart leapt when she caught it and delivered a handful of blue flames to the face of the Death Eater holding onto her. The battle was not yet over.

Turning his attention back to Ginny, he sprinted back to where she was lying on the ground. She was still swatting and kicking at her

assailants, but her return attacks were becoming slower and weaker as her endurance waned.

*"Petrificus Totalus! Petrificus Totalus!"* Two of the dead bodies stumbled and fell away from her, their limbs locked at their sides, and he could see her face again. It was bloodied and covered with dirt but there was a glimmer in her eyes, there was a liveliness to them – and in her every movement there was passion. Ginny Weasley did not want to die. Not yet. She let out a shout, a rallying battle cry, and with an explosion of adrenaline, she overpowered the third Inferius, wrestling it over onto its back until she was the one on top. Her clenched fist was raised into the air and then it came down with full force straight into the Death Eater's face. She did it again, and again, and again, until her knuckles were chewed and red and the body did not move anymore.

All of that happened in about six seconds.

Seeing that neither Hermione nor Ginny needed his assistance anymore, he looked for Ron. His stomach flipped when he saw his best mate – Ron's face had gone pale and he saw a nasty gash on the back of his head that was leaking blood. There was nothing he could do about it. Ron was going to die here if he couldn't end this fight soon.

"Harry, look out!"

He didn't have time to think about whether it was Hermione or Ginny shouting at him before an ice cold hand came barreling into his face. Harry stumbled backward, dizzy from the unexpected assault and raised his wand – but he lost his voice when he looked up.

There were *dozens* more of them, slowly ambling down the short corridor from the main part of the basement. Was it ever going to end?

Thinking had no place in a heated fight like this. Shoving his misgivings about the outcome of the battle to the back of his mind, he took a few daring steps forward, facing the advancing crowd of rotting flesh. He was about to attempt a spell that he'd seen Dumbledore use in his duel against Voldemort at the Ministry. If done correctly, a long,



fiery rope would emerge from the tip of his wand and he could use it to force the Inferi out of the room. The only catch to the plan was that he'd never performed the spell or even correctly been taught how to use it. There were a great deal of things that could go horribly wrong if he cast it incorrectly, but he'd learned so much about offensive spells and hexes in the last year... it was worth a *try*...

He exhaled slowly. A bead of sweat dripped down the side of his face. Desperate times called for desperate measures.

*"Flagello Creare Incendiam!"*

The instant after he shouted the spell, he knew he'd done it correctly because a long, snake-like chain burst out of his wand and crackled through the air. Harry brought his wand around in a tight arc and the whip swung to the right, catching the Inferi along their sides, hissing as it sizzled through rotting flesh and bone. The fiery rope allowed him to easily contain the mass of Death Eaters and push them out of the fight away from his friends. He grunted as he pulled the whip back and lashed out at the corralled Inferi, using the flames to slice through their bodies.

When all that was left was a quivering assortment of severed limbs, he turned around to survey the battle. After getting her wand back, Hermione had successfully managed to disable the last few Death Eaters around her and she was now tending to Ron, wearing a frightened expression on her face. Ginny had somehow found a wand from somewhere and she was leaning heavily against the wall, keeping it pointed directly at Voldemort, who hadn't moved at all during the entire fight.

Harry flicked his wand and the magical chain disappeared. He cast a few cursory glances around the room and after determining that there was nothing more to be done, he strode over to the Dark Lord.

"You've failed, Tom," he said simply, regarding the other man.

Voldemort spit blood at his feet and sneered up at him.

"Harry?" came the tiny voice of Hermione. His eyes darted over to her, where she knelt by Ron's prone form along the ground. She looked

down and tenderly stroked his ashen cheek. "He's... he's not breathing..." Her voice began to tremble and her eyes glistened with tears. "And I can't find a pulse..."

"Ron?"

"Harry, I – I think he's-"

He forgot all about facing down Voldemort and hurried over to his best friend, kneeling down beside Hermione. His jaw fell open when he felt the coldness of Ron's skin. As he looked at his friend's lifeless face, he felt Hermione's shaky hand clutch his shoulder and he heard her quiet sobs. "Hermione, I-"

She looked up into his eyes. There was sadness, weariness, and resignation in her gaze – but above all else, there was fury. Her grip on his shoulder tightened and he suddenly realized that she was shaking not from sorrow but from rage. A solid weight pressed down relentlessly onto his chest. He knew what she was going to say next. Hermione's hazel eyes, normally bright with amusement and affection in the company of Harry and Ron, were now wintry and sullen.

"Harry," she said, her voice murderously quiet, "I want you to kill him."

He nodded soberly and stood up, purposefully advancing toward Voldemort once more. Without a single word, he took aim with his wand-

"Wait!" cried Ginny. She looked at Harry pleadingly. "Let me do it," she begged softly. "He was my brother, I deserve to be the one-"

"Ginny," he began, a stern tone underscoring his words, "I can't let you. The prophecy-"

"I don't *care* what the bloody prophecy says," she bit out, glaring at both him and Voldemort. "Look at him. He's weak. Anybody could kill him."

Harry glanced over at the dark wizard again and gasped when he saw that he was standing tall with his arms stretched behind him, his chest thrust out, and his chin pointed up. Voldemort licked his lips

and an expression of ecstasy appeared on his wasted face. Then he grinned and he began to laugh – not sounding raspy or weak, but instead his voice was deep, healthy, and rich.

“Harry? G-Ginny?” Hermione had her wand pointed at Voldemort but her arm was shaking badly.

Voldemort looked at her and smirked. In a bored drawl he said, “Your boyfriend's soul was quite... *refreshing*.”

“How dare you,” she started in a harsh whisper, staring at him in horror. Her eyes hardened and she jabbed her wand at him and shouted, “*Expell-*”

In the blink of an eye, Voldemort summoned one of his Death Eater's wands to him and with a deft twist of his wrist, blasted Hermione clear across the room where she crashed into a wall and sank to the floor.

Harry immediately leapt into the fray, shooting his most powerful curses and hexes at Voldemort, with Ginny not too far behind him. The Dark Lord deflected all of the spells with ease, the smile on his face becoming wilder and more disturbing with each failed attempt to harm him.

“Dumbledore sent *children* to fight me!” he roared gleefully, moving around the room with a surprising amount of dexterity, sharply contrasting with the earlier weakness he had shown. “*Crucio!*”

The curse zipped by Harry and destroyed a section of the wall, creating a cloud of dirt and dust behind him. Voldemort cackled and tried the Cruciatus again.

“*Crucio!*”

Harry again managed to dodge it, but Ginny was not as fortunate and the curse struck her in the stomach, knocking her off her feet. Her tormented screams immediately filled the room and she helplessly thrashed around on the floor.

“You bastard-”

He wasn't able to finish the insult before he was thrown off balance by one of Voldemort's spells. The dark wizard regarded Harry with a look of satisfaction. "I'll deal with you in a moment."

Harry struggled to his feet, to search for his wand which had fallen out of his hands, but he was in too much pain and his body refused to obey his commands. He could only watch in frustration as Voldemort approached Ginny like the predator he was, watching in perverse fascination as she suffered under the effects of the Cruciatus.

"I can be merciful," he pronounced grandly, shooting a smug sidelong glance at Harry as he did so. "I am not entirely without compassion for others." The breath caught in Harry's throat and his mouth suddenly went dry as Voldemort carelessly pointed his stolen wand at Ginny, who was still squirming about. "I now release you from your tortured existence, young one. *Avada Kedavra!*"

Ginny instantly ceased moving and her body lie still, contorted into an abnormal position, looking like a marionette that had been distastefully cast aside after its strings had been severed.

She was dead.

"No!" he screamed, cursing himself for not being able to protect her. He let out a pained cry, full of grief and anger and hatred. Harry doubled his efforts to get up and slowly stood tall, glaring at Ginny's murderer. "You're dead, Tom."

A faint shadow of a smile crossed Voldemort's face and then it was gone. "*Avada-*

"*Avada-*"

Twin jets of sickly green light shot out and locked with each other in between the two dueling wizards. A great din rumbled throughout the room as waves of magical energy rolled forth from the connection of the curses.

"Did you forget, Harry?" shouted Voldemort over the noise. "*Priori Incantatem!* Our wands will not allow us to kill each other!" His eyes

shimmered with malicious intent and he curled his lip, showing his teeth. "But this time, oh *this* time, young Harry, I will defeat you."

Through gritted teeth Harry yelled back at him, "I didn't forget, Tom."

Then, before the darkest wizard in the world could fathom that last statement, Harry pulled a dagger out of a sheath he kept around his ankle and threw it as hard as he could directly at the other man's chest. There was a rumbling thunderclap as the massive collection of energy dissipated into the air when the connection was broken and both men were blown away from the explosion.

Harry was on his feet in a heartbeat, his wand out, prepared for battle – but his opponent was still on his back. His dagger had found its mark and was buried deep in the dark wizard's chest; Voldemort's wand had slipped out of his hand and his eyes had lost their crimson glow. It was over.

Lord Voldemort was dead – felled not by magical means, but by a simple Muggle dagger. Harry would have laughed at the irony of the situation if there was anyone else around to laugh with.

Ginny was gone, murdered by Voldemort. Ron was dead as well, killed at the hands of Lucius Malfoy. And what of Hermione...?

He rushed over to her crumpled form on the floor. "Hermione?" he called out quietly, reaching for her, cradling her head in his hands. "Hermione, wake up, it's me."

His heart leapt with joy when her eyes fluttered and she stared up at the ceiling. A wearied smile tugged at the corners of her mouth. "It's... you..." she mumbled.

"Yes! Yes, it's me!" Harry brushed away a stray tear trickling down his cheek. "Everything's going to be all right, Hermione! I promise, I swear to you..."

But something wasn't right. Her eyes were unfocused and there was an absent, dreamy quality to her voice... Did he feel blood on his hands? *Her* blood? Harry thought furiously, running through options in his mind, ways he could save her.

"Ron," she went on, her words slurring themselves together, "I... I don't know if I ever told you... I love you."

He pulled his hand away and gazed at it, a sinking feeling landing in his chest. His fingers were tinged with Hermione's warm blood. Attempting healing magic was one thing, but trying to fix a head injury with his level of experience was likely to do more harm than good to her... and he couldn't Disapparate either, the Anti-Apparition protection around the farmhouse prevented that.

Barring a miracle, Harry was going to witness Hermione die.

The least he could do was make her feel comfortable in her last few minutes of life.

"Ron? Ron...?" she called out feebly. "Are... are you still there?"

Not knowing what else he could do, Harry replied, "Yes. Yes, I'm here, Hermione."

A beatific smile spread across her face and she closed her eyes, sighing contentedly. "Ron, I don't know... I don't know how much longer I'll be here..."

"It's okay," he answered in a whisper, allowing his tears to fall freely. "It doesn't matter. I'll just meet you... on the other side."

"Oh, Ron-"

"I..." He hesitated. Would it be right to continue on with the masquerade? Harry peered down at Hermione, looking so beautiful and so very pale, sitting precariously on the edge between life and death. He gulped and held onto her hand gently. "Hermione... I love you."

Her hand squeezed his tightly and then the pressure was abruptly released.

"Goodbye," he heard himself say, his voice hoarse.

Harry Potter had saved the world – but what kind of a world was left? Voldemort had taken everyone who'd ever meant something to him: his parents, Sirius, Ron, Ginny, and Hermione. Was there anything worth living for anymore?

An irrational anger flared up inside him. Why had *he* been chosen to be the one to triumph over Voldemort? It wasn't right. It wasn't *fair*. There were tens of thousands of wizards and millions of Muggles who would never be able to fully appreciate what he'd done here or what he'd sacrificed for them. There were millions of people who could go on living happy lives with their friends and family, never knowing, never caring about Lord Voldemort and his sadistic Death Eaters...

"To hell with it," he bitterly spat out, sinking down against the wall, not daring to look at any of the four freshly fallen corpses in the room with him. His voice began to tremble. "I don't *care* any... a-anymore..."

New tears began to trickle down his face and although he was clenching his teeth together, he could not keep his jaw from quivering. He pointed his wand shakily at his own wrist, allowing the wood tip to brush against his skin. In his head, he knew what he wanted to do – he knew that he wanted to *escape* and be rid of his problems. He wanted to be with his friends again... forever.

But the words wouldn't come out. His entire body was shaking and he kept thinking to himself, '*This is what I want, I need to do this for myself.*'

He sniffed once and hastily brushed away the tears from his eyes. That wasn't right – he was *brave*... why was he crying? He'd faced down the darkest wizard in fifty years and defeated him mere moments ago, so why was he so afraid of what he wanted to do?

"Damn it, Harry," he snapped out loud. He shook his head in frustration and a grimace swept over his face. "*Diffindo! DIFFINDO!*"

Crisp, deep gashes appeared in his skin and before he could stop himself, he switched hands and repeated the spell on his other arm. Blood trickled freely from his wrists and he had difficulty maneuvering the wand with his weakened hands, but after fumbling around for a

minute, he snapped his beloved wand in half and chucked the pieces into opposite corners of the room.

“There,” he said to nobody. “Now there's... no temptation...”

Harry closed his eyes and waited for sweet oblivion to take him.

He was very, very lost, and he was trying to swim as well, but he was having difficulty keeping his head above the water. Breathing seemed to have become a foreign task to him – it almost felt like his body had forgotten how to – and a certain part of his brain wondered, *'Well, wouldn't it be easier to just stop trying altogether?'*

No. That wasn't right *at all*. He had to keep trying, he had to breathe, he had to push on and swim far, far away because... well, because he *had* to.

From somewhere in the distance – or was it very close? He couldn't tell. There was noise – there was a *song* that sounded like it was emanating from all around him. Beautiful, haunting harmonies echoed throughout his head, buoying him above the surface, allowing air – sweet, fresh *air* to fill his lungs and give him that added push to make him move again.

He heard sweeping counterpoint harmonies and there was light.

Over to his side, a warm, comforting voice said, “He's alive.”

The crackling fire was reflected in Dumbledore's spectacles, but not in his eyes. In a quiet voice he explained, “A few members of the Order and myself arrived just in time to save you, Harry. If we had been delayed by even a single minute...”

“So,” began Harry, still struggling to come to terms with the fact that he'd attempted to kill himself. “What happened next?”

The headmaster's eyes flicked over to Harry for the barest of seconds and a sad little smile appeared behind his beard. “I brought you here,” he answered plainly. “I wouldn't have left you there, Harry.”

“Yes, I know,” he went on impatiently. “I meant-”



“And for two years,” Dumbledore continued quietly, cutting him off. “I kept you at Hogwarts, under my watch.” He paused, his expression pained. “I am not proud of what I have done.”

Harry kept his lips pressed firmly together, not knowing what to say. At length, he finally asked, “How?”

“Harry,” Dumbledore muttered, taking a deep breath and frowning slightly. “You... you're...”

Never before had Harry ever seen the great headmaster at a loss for words. “Sir?” he prompted gently.

Those intense, wizened eyes stared at him and he shifted uncomfortably in his seat. “Harry,” the headmaster said, his voice sounding strangely distant, “to me, you're the grandson I never had.”

“I was a fool,” Dumbledore bit out, shaking his head. “I wanted to protect you, shelter you. After all you'd been through... after all *I'd* put you through... I felt you deserved to be happy.

“I created a world for you, Harry. Right inside this very castle. It was a world where your friends Ron and Hermione-”

“And Ginny,” he interrupted.

“Yes, and Ginny, too, were still alive.” Dumbledore gazed at him over his golden frames. “For you, as long as you stayed in that world, you could always be happy. There was no Voldemort – there were no Death Eaters. There were your friends, and you.”

“A fantasy world...” breathed Harry, trying to comprehend living in such a place.

“I kept watch over you every day,” he resumed, folding his fingers together in his lap. “Until one day, you didn't smile as much... and it gradually got worse as the days passed. Finally, you confronted me.”

“*I* confronted *you*?”

He leaned forward in his seat and said, "You remembered." Those two words shocked Harry into silence and Dumbledore smiled kindly. "So I erased your memory-" Harry's expression darkened "-and I sent you back. But it was not to be. You kept coming back to me, quicker each time, and you would always remember what had happened."

"Why couldn't you just let me go?" he questioned. Harry glanced at the older man, curious to know why he had done this to him.

"I didn't want you to try and hurt yourself again." The headmaster sighed and sagged down in his seat. "The last time you came to me, I tried to erase not just the memory of the deaths of your friends... but *everything* you'd ever known. Then, to ensure that you would not have another relapse, I sent you out into the Muggle world... far away from anything that I felt would help you to remember."

"Yet here I am," stated Harry resolutely, looking at Dumbledore gravely.

"Yes, here you are," mumbled the old wizard.

The two men stared at each other for a long moment. To anyone observing them, it would have appeared that they were sizing each other up, preparing for battle. But then Dumbledore held his hands out at his sides, palms up.

"I have wronged you, Harry," he said sincerely, regretfully, "and for that, I am sorry." The headmaster looked down at the floor. "If... if there is anything I can do..."

"No," he responded curtly as he stood up. "I'm leaving."

"Where will you go?" Dumbledore asked softly, not bothering to stand up.

"Where else?" Harry countered, raising his eyebrows and shaking his head. "I'm going home."

**A/N 10/2/06:**

The suicide attempt scene was the most difficult part of this entire chapter to write because, for me, it was very personal.

Obliviate is finished right now. I will be writing an epilogue to tie up loose ends and answer some questions that have gone unanswered so far. What did you think? What did you like? What didn't you like? Reviews are always appreciated!

## **Giving credit where credit is due:**

My beta friend Melissa read through Chapter 7 for me. Please, if you like what you've seen here, check out her work as well. She is Acoustics1220 on this website.

## Epilogue

Bleary, sleep-filled eyes blinked once, twice, and finally came to focus on an identical set of bleary, sleep-filled eyes. In the meager morning light seeping in through the window, she could see her pupils were dilated, trying to cut through the dark and make sense of the world around her. Where was the light switch, again...?

Toothpaste on the brush – so. What next?

She blinked again and tiredly rubbed her eyes. Why was it so hard to remember everything this morning? An uncoordinated hand fumbled around in the medicine cabinet, searching for something that would get rid of her throbbing headache. The label on the side of the bottle told her to take two pills, but she blatantly ignored it and downed three.

Her head *hurt*.

Coherence had kindly decided to return to her and her migraine was slowly fading away. What had she done last night? She wanted to tell herself that she'd spent the evening comfortably perched in the living room by the fire, reading a book, yet there was that nagging feeling that something else had happened. Something *important*.

She'd figure it out eventually. It probably wasn't that important anyway.

Without really thinking anymore about things, Nora continued on through her morning routine. After splashing cold water on her face, she blinked and backed away from the mirror. She suddenly *knew* what was wrong. Her hand absently strayed to her neck, tracing patterns over the bare skin of her Adam's apple. Where there should have been the weight of a silver chain and a cross there was nothing.

She anxiously glanced about the bathroom, scanning the floor for any sign of her necklace, but it was gone. Nora fretfully chewed on her lip – the necklace was very old and precious to her. Where had it gotten to? The very *idea* that she had foolishly lost it was simply inconceivable. She'd never taken it off before; at least she couldn't remember the last time its familiar, reassuring presence had parted ways with her...

He emerged from the headmaster's office with his face set into a blank, impassive mask. Luna nervously approached him, holding her hand out to touch his cheek. She gave him a shy smile, trying to make eye contact with him but he kept his gaze pointed at the floor.

"Come on, Harry," she whispered, tugging gently on his arm. "Let's get out of here."

She pulled at his sleeve but he shrugged her off and shook his head. He tilted his chin up and locked eyes with her. "I can't."

There was a certain firmness and sense of finality to his words and his countenance that discouraged any further questioning. But Luna wasn't going to give in so easily. Her eyes had been set on Harry for years – he wasn't going to slip out of her reach in a matter of days. She moved closer to him, trying to wrap her arms around him in an embrace but he took a step back and sighed.

"Luna."

"Harry?" she asked softly, her voice wavering slightly. "What's wrong? What did he tell you up there?"

"What's wrong?" he echoed, shrugging and jamming his hands into his pockets. "What's wrong?" His lips curled upwards into a taut, cheerless smile. "Everything, Luna. Everything's wrong."

"Let me help you," she offered earnestly, a concerned look coming across her face.

He shook his head again and brushed an escaping tear out of his eye. She held her breath as he stepped toward her and pulled her into a hug. What was he trying to say? Was he finally hers...?

“Luna,” he croaked, sounding hoarse. “Thank you. For being here, for helping me.”

“It was nothing,” she replied, her heart pounding madly in her chest as she felt his strong arms holding her tight, holding her close to him. Then suddenly he pulled away and she blinked, wearing a questioning expression. “I-”

“I need to go on alone from here,” he said quietly, avoiding her eyes. “Maybe you can help me some other time, but *not now*.”

“Harry...” she breathed, crestfallen at his decision. So it really *had* been too good to be true. Harry Potter, the Boy-Who-Lived and savior of the wizarding world, was walking away from her. She felt her shoulders drop but made no other movements; she made no other attempts to win him back. His mind was already made up – and there was nothing she could do about it except face it as bravely as she could. “Look at you,” she tried futilely. “You’re in no shape to be by yourself! I can go with you, I can help you-”

“I’m sorry, Luna.” He shot her one last sad smile and gave her arm a reassuring squeeze before calmly walking down the hall, away from her, away from Hogwarts; away from the things he had once loved so dearly.

It was raining. Large drops fell from the sky, splattering against the windshield and blurring the world before him. He could barely determine the passing cars from houses or trees – all of the unfocused shapes of color and light were blending together into one messy collage of uncertainty. Everything around him was unclear and indefinite.

Nothing really made sense to him, but that’s the way his life was at the moment, so he felt entirely at ease being in the midst of such confusion.

Through a droplet-covered window, he frowned at his own obscured reflection in the side mirror. Somewhere on his way here, the mirror had been bumped so now all he could see in it was a distorted image of himself. He’d rather it was shattered and unusable.

His heartbeat picked up as headlights approached and slowed down, parking along the side of the street. Harry leaned forward over the steering wheel, squinting to see through the rain. The driver killed the lights and stepped out of the vehicle a moment later, pulling out an umbrella and unhurriedly walking up a short path to a house. He watched the figure through the side window, pressing his nose up against the glass to try and get a better view. There was a flash of red hair-

He opened his door, stepping out into the elements; he didn't care that he was rapidly becoming soaked through since he had forgotten to wear a cloak. There were other, more pressing issues on his mind.

The slender, feminine figure in front of him paused at the front door of the house, fumbling with the lock. Harry was about twenty feet away from her when he called out, "Hey!"

At first the woman didn't turn around; she kept trying to open the door.

"Hey!" he repeated, taking a step closer. At long last she turned around and faced him, her house keys dangling from one hand, her umbrella held in the other. Harry allowed a small smile to crack his lips.

"Hi," she said. He thought she sounded breathless from excitement. She stood there in all her loveliness, watching him, waiting for him to say something.

He opened his mouth to speak when a car passed by too quickly and splashed water all over his back. Harry barely noticed – he was already drenched from the rain. "Nora," he began, but he stopped when he felt a heavy hand rest itself on his shoulder. Startled, he turned around and his mouth opened in disbelief as he found himself unexpectedly staring up into the solemn face of Albus Dumbledore.

"Good day," he called out pleasantly, waving his free hand at Nora and steering Harry back to his car. The younger man anxiously craned his neck to see over his shoulder but Nora had already disappeared behind her front door. "Please," Dumbledore said blandly, gesturing to his car. "If you would be so kind."

Harry gave the old man a wary sidelong glance as he opened the door and seated himself back in the driver's seat. There was no visible trace of the weariness or the resignation that had been so prominent in his features back at Hogwarts. Instead, the headmaster appeared to be in good spirits, if his lively blue eyes and his faint smile were any indication. Dumbledore stepped around the vehicle and sat down in the passenger seat. Turning to his right, he sent Harry an apologetic look.

"What are you doing here?" Harry asked bluntly, his hands on the wheel and his eyes staring straight ahead at the clouded windshield.

"I came here to prevent you from making a mistake, Harry," the headmaster answered quietly, still trying to make eye contact with him.

"You know," he spat out as he gripped the steering wheel too tightly and his knuckles turned white, "why can't you just stay out of my life?"

"If you want me to, I will," Dumbledore replied evenly. "But I cannot allow you to ruin your life before it even begins again."

He turned his narrowed eyes onto the man sitting next to him. "What are you talking about?"

The older man's sharp, calculating, cobalt stare seemed to cut right through to his core and Harry felt himself lean back, away from the gaze that was making him feel so vulnerable. "I'll be blunt with you then," he began, raising his eyebrows. "I think you've earned it, after all." Harry didn't say anything as he waited for him to continue. With no fanfare whatsoever, Dumbledore said, "I erased Miss O'Connor's memories of you."

Silence descended upon the pair, thick and uncomfortable. Harry didn't know what to say so he kept his mouth shut, waiting for the further explanation that he knew wasn't going to come. After some time had passed, he asked, "Why?"

Dumbledore nodded. He had been expecting that question. "Because she knew too much about us, about wizards. She was a liability and she was a serious breach of the Statute of Secr-"



"That's bullshit," he spat out venomously. He looked straight into the older man's eyes, pointed a finger at his chest and said, "I could have *married* her."

"Yes," the headmaster said after a short hesitation. "You could have."

"So I'll ask you again," Harry cut in savagely. He knew he was being short and he didn't care. It felt too good to finally let some of his pent up anger out. "Why'd you do it if you *knew* that?"

Dumbledore's lip twitched but there was no other expression on his face that could give away his innermost thoughts. "I didn't think you'd choose her," he said quietly after a while.

"Didn't think I'd *choose* her?" he burst out, furiously scratching at the back of his neck. "Did you think that I would *want* to go back to live in the wizarding world? The world where I'd be reminded *every single* bloody day of what I had lost?" There was raw emotion in his voice and in his words. "I... I was happy here. With her."

For a moment, Harry thought he spied a suspicious droplet of moisture at the corner of one of the older man's eyes, but Dumbledore blinked and it was as if his eye had drank it up. He stubbornly glared at the headmaster. "Fix her."

"I beg your pardon?" the older man asked, his white eyebrows arching up in surprise.

"You heard me!" he pressed on more forcefully, slamming his fist against the wheel. "Bring her memories back – reverse the spell!"

"I'm afraid I can't do that," came the unwanted answer. Before Harry could cut him off again, he quickly continued, "The mind is a fragile thing."

"And what's that supposed to mean?"

Dumbledore frowned as he took his spectacles in his hand and began polishing them on his robe. "I'm afraid that if I meddle with her memories any further I could cause permanent damage. Reversing Memory Charms is quite a bit riskier than casting them."

“So what you're really saying is that... she's gone?” Harry wondered out loud, feeling faint.

The headmaster sighed and folded his hands together. “Yes.”

Harry looked out the window at the house again, almost expecting Nora to come bursting out through her front door to give him one of her fabulous warm welcomes. The phantom sensations of her embrace and her kiss made him draw a slow, painful breath. A depressing ache settled in his chest as he realized that never again would he be able to hold her in his arms, to hear her whisper his name, to stare so deeply into her eyes.

She had been torn away from him by Dumbledore – not out of anger or any intent to cause pain – but simply because he'd wanted to protect him, like a father protecting a son.

Knowing that truth should have made it easier, lessened the hurt some, made him back up and see the situation from an objective outside perspective – but it didn't. The pain was still there and along with it came an overwhelming sense of fatigue.

He closed his eyes and leaned back in his seat. In a strained voice he said, “Get out of my car.”

Dumbledore didn't move and even through his closed lids he could feel his penetrating stare on him. “I made a mistake, Harry.”

Hearing the old man admit that he had failed didn't pacify him. Instead, all of the emotions welled up inside him and turned into black, icy, unforgiving *nothingness*. He just wanted Dumbledore to *go away*. Tonelessly he declared, “I've already heard your apologies. Now *get out of my car*.”

A heartbeat later there was the unmistakable *click-thunk* of a car door opening and closing. He opened his eyes and saw that Dumbledore had left. It was still raining too hard for him to see out the window properly – to see whether or not the old man had decided to Disapparate or simply walk away – but that hardly mattered right now; his mind was elsewhere. Harry miserably slumped down in his seat,

turning a doleful eye back on the drab, ordinary building that was home to Nora O'Connor.

*His* Nora, who would never be his again.

It might have been the fact that it was raining, or maybe it was because he was completely alone. In the end, the reason was unimportant. The unforgiving reality of what he had once held and what was now lost to him forever was too much for him to handle.

Sinking down in his seat, he held his face in his hands and for the first time in years, he wept.

Albus Dumbledore stood before an elegant floor-length mirror which had been handed down to him by his predecessor, Armando Dippet. He was dressed plainly in crisp yet somber grey dress robes.

"Looking sharp, sir," wheezed the ancient mirror in a tone of due respect.

The headmaster smiled blandly but did not reply. He knew his time had finally come, and if he had to go, he was going to do it with as much dignity as he could possibly muster. Fawkes cocked his head to the side and gave him a quizzical look, as if asking, "*What are you doing?*" The handsome phoenix was nearing his Burning Day and it appeared as though he was struggling to remain atop his perch. Dumbledore gently stroked the bird and sighed as more of his feathers fell out.

"An old man must pay for his mistakes. I'm allowing a conference with the press on school grounds," he quietly explained to Fawkes. He flattened the folds on his robes and added, "You may come in, Minerva, I know you're standing there."

If the deputy headmistress was surprised at all, she didn't show it. Her jaw was set firmly and her gaze was unwavering as she strode purposefully into Dumbledore's private chamber. "I'm glad you're finally seeing reason, Albus." He nodded silently as she continued, "You never could have kept it a secret for much longer."

It was true, and it at least consoled him to a certain extent. After he spoke with the awaiting journalists and told them that the scandal was not a lie, he would not be a popular wizard by any means. When word got out that Albus Dumbledore had kept Harry Potter, defeater of Voldemort, in captivity for two years...

He'd already received an owl from a representative of the board of governors for Hogwarts and the message had all but told him that he would no longer be headmaster of the school. Dumbledore was sure of the fact that there would be many, many more such demotions in the near future – in material as well as respect. The public outcry against his actions was going to be enormous and impossible to ignore.

In short, his days of power and influence were going to be over.

Well, best to get it all done without delay. Mustering his courage and what remained of his pride, he stood tall and nodded at the witch.

“Minerva?” She arched a quizzical brow as he gave her a disarming smile. “Take care of the school for me, won't you?”

Her eyes softened and a faint smile appeared on her face. “Of course. You know I would, Albus.”

There he was, standing barely three feet away from her, looking just as handsome as she remembered and still exuding that aura of unassuming charm. Even though nearly a year had passed since she'd last seen him, his hair was as messy as ever, but she thought it was oddly appealing, and a wistful smile appeared on her face as she remembered running her hands through it in the past. Her gaze came to rest upon his strong chin and his lips, traveling down his body, admiring the broadness of his shoulders...

Harry Potter was right in front of her, yet she couldn't have him.

It was a shame, really.

When his head had suddenly and quite unexpectedly appeared in her hearth and he had asked her if he could come through the Floo, Luna had let him in without a second thought. Some part of her heart that

he hadn't broken resolutely clung onto the belief that maybe he'd reconsidered their relationship, yet she knew from the very center of her being that he wasn't here to do that. She wanted to scream and rage at him for leaving her but there was everything genuine and remorseful in his voice and in his demeanor – and it was impossible to feel angry or bitter around him.

Harry shifted his weight around awkwardly and didn't make eye contact with her.

"I'm sorry for doing this to you."

She managed to put forth a half-hearted smile. "What do you want, Harry?" she asked weakly as she crossed her arms over her chest.

He anxiously clasped his hands together as he looked up and finally looked into her eyes. "You once told me that you could help me. Do you remember? Do you remember when you said that?"

Her gaze clouded over, the memory of the day he left her coming back to her in a rush... Why, of all things, why would he be asking her for help *now*? Time should have soothed her wounds, allowed them to turn into hardened scars – but the separation, the distance, the emptiness he had left behind had prevented her emotional bruises from healing, and every passing image, every thought, every feeling that she associated with him only reminded her of the pain.

"I'm guessing that you do remember," he continued gently, watching her with understanding in his eyes.

She tried to reply but her voice caught in her throat and the answer came out in a harsh whisper. "Yes."

"Please, Luna," he pleaded insistently. "I need your help now."

"After all this time?" she retorted, her voice cracking slightly. "After an entire year? Where have you *been*, Harry? You ignored me for a year after dumping me! I had to go through the *papers* just like everyone else to find out what happened to you! I was so *worried*. Didn't you get any of the owls I sent you? And you disconnected yourself from the Floo so I wasn't able to talk to you there, either. But you know

what, Harry? I've moved on. I would have at least hoped that you'd have done the same – but it seems you haven't."

He winced at her words but she could tell he wasn't going to give up so readily. "Luna-"

"No, Harry," she said, feeling more confident now. "I don't even know what business you have being in my living room right now!"

"You let me-"

"What do you *want*, Harry?" she finished, hopelessness clinging onto her words. "What in Merlin's name could I help you with now?"

He swallowed once before asking, "Luna, do you still love me?"

What kind of question was *that*? The sheer nerve of him to even ask it – but it made her hesitate and reflect upon her emotions. Did she still love him? It was true, the mere sight of him was enough to send butterflies zipping around her stomach – but was that really love? As he earnestly stood there before her and asked her that question, she was shocked to find that something inside her was responding to him. An ache that had rested within her soul, dormant and numb for so long, was rearing its ugly head, trying to claw its way out of her chest and split her heart in two all over again.

She kept her mouth closed, afraid of the words that might escape her lips and make a right mess out of things.

"Please, Luna."

Damn him! Damn him for being so... so *honest* with everything. Harry Potter could be such a difficult bloke to resist at times. What made it worse was that it was obvious to her that he wasn't even aware of the effect he was having on her.

"Again I ask you: what do you want?"

He stared at her for a long moment before finally saying, "I want to forget."

“What...?”

“I can't live like this any longer, Luna. I can't be... who I *am*... any longer. I've had enough.” It was frightening to see someone who she'd always thought of as being so *invincible* exposing his deepest insecurities to her. A shiver slithered up her spine as he continued on, “Luna... Luna, I need you to help me forget.”

“*Harry*...” she said mournfully, sympathetically, as understanding dawned on her. He hung his head and let his guard down, letting Luna tenderly brush his cheek with her hand. “I... I don't know if I can-”

“For me,” he begged. “*Please*.”

Something in her cried out for him, for his loss, for his suffering, and Luna found herself nodding numbly. She knew it wasn't right to run away from one's problems, like Harry would be doing; the best way to resolve them was to face them directly, to learn to cope with them and eventually to conquer them. But she also knew how hard that road was and how tiresome it could be on somebody's soul. If there was anyone in the entire world who deserved the easy way out, it was Harry. And if someone was going to be the one to let him go, it was going to be her.

“Is there anything you want to remember?” she asked delicately.

He looked at her and shook his head. Luna supposed some part of her should have been upset that he hadn't said “*you*” but she was smarter than that. Her Ravenclaw brains knew that allowing Harry to remember her would defeat the purpose of erasing his memory in the first place.

“Good bye, Harry.” Her eyes were suddenly moist and she swept him up into a tight hug. “I never got to say good bye last time...”

“Good bye, Luna,” he said into her shoulder. His voice was muffled yet there was a slight waver to it and she guessed that he would have tears on his face, but when he pulled away and stared at her expectantly, his cheeks were dry and his eyes betrayed no emotion.

A melancholy smile appeared on his lips; it was a smile full of relief and gratitude and love. It was a smile that said, "*I'm finally free.*"

She regarded the Boy-Who-Lived one last time and felt her jaw trembling as she raised her wand and

whispered, "*Obliviate.*"

There she was again.

That same, charming red-head shared a secret smile with him from the pew across the aisle. He quickly averted his eyes, feeling a blush rising to his cheeks, and when he looked over her way again, he could see she was trying to stifle a chuckle.

Was it wrong to be flirting like this in a church?

He didn't know what it was about her, but there was *something* there. It was as if she was a beautiful dream who had followed him out of his sleep into the waking world, and he wanted to know her better. He *had* to.

The service ended and dozens of people stood up, blocking his view of her.

He struggled to push his way through the crowd, sneaking down through a side aisle and quickly exiting the building to find his way to the parking lot. Outside, there was a steady stream of churchgoers walking to their cars, but there was no hint of shimmering red hair among the sea of people.

But then suddenly there she was, leaving through the same side door as he had walked through moments before, looking beautiful and alive. They made eye contact and the distance was closed between them until they were standing inches away, staring into each other's eyes, feeling the mad beating of their own hearts.

"James. James Evans," he said quickly, keeping his eyes on her.

"Nora..." she answered, and a look of mild confusion appeared on her features. "Have we met before?"



He smiled politely and shook his head. "I was about to ask you the same thing."

Nora brushed her hair back and laughed nervously, finally averting her eyes from his gaze. They wandered down his chin, to his neck... "What's that you have here?"

"This?" he asked, pulling a simple silver chain with a cross out from under his shirt. "It's a necklace," he supplied, and he frowned as if trying to remember something. He opened his mouth and then pursed his lips before finally saying, "It- I remember... it was given to me by someone very close to me."

Once again she looked up into his eyes. How could it be? It *couldn't* be hers... could it? There was just something about him that she had to figure out, something that called out to her, made her breath catch in her throat and quicken her pulse...

"Say, James," she said shyly, "would you like to get something to eat?"

His eyes lit up and sparkled magnificently as he extended a hand to her and she took it. "I would love to."

### **A/N 11/7/06:**

Wow, this one took a while to write, didn't it? Please believe me when I say that I'm incredibly sorry about the delay. I could give you an unsatisfying excuse – oh, it was my job, or my schoolwork was kicking me around – but the simple, undeniable truth of the matter is that I just didn't have anything to write for the epilogue. Even though I had this entire story plotted out (including each of the scenes written above) I just ran out of gas, so to speak, after writing ten chapters in about two months.

I assume you have many questions about what has happened in Obliviate. I hope that what I have to say will clear things up for you, if the epilogue has already failed to do so.

Yes, McGonagall informed the press about Dumbledore's misdoings. If you remember, she was in on the entire thing with Dumbledore

from the beginning (she was the second, feminine voice in the first chapter) and she was already questioning him then about whether or not what they were doing was ethical.

I decided to leave Harry's imprisonment vague. There were ideas in my head: maybe Harry could have been disguised as a different student each year at the school, or maybe he was kept in an enchanted prison similar (but far more hospitable than) to Moody's prison in book four. But nothing truly inspiring came to mind and I left it open to be interpreted by your imagination. I think it's more fun that way, no?

In reading such a large amount of fanfiction, I have been appalled by how many times Dumbledore has been turned into such a *villain* in post-OoTP stories. I know I took a similar approach to my characterization of the great wizard, but I hope that I was able to exonerate him of all malicious *intentions*, even if his actions came across as being quite sinister.

Sam and Nate, Harry's coworkers, are the names taken respectively from the lead guitarist and singer of one of my favorite bands, The Format. I just saw them at Ithaca this past weekend... Amazing.

In retrospect, I'm disappointed by the way Nora turned out in this story. People have pointed out to me that she seems to be quite shallow and her actions contradict the way she's supposed to be. All of that is really my fault, so I have only myself to blame. I think I was just happy because this is the first chaptered story that I have ever written so I forgot to flesh out her character enough.

Anyway, that's enough of my blabbering. Thank you for reading my story! Please, if you loved it or hated it, leave a review. It's one of the only indications I get that people have actually read my work.

Regards,

Ryan

VacantSkies

Zaphod Beeblebrox